

LEARNING TO LOVE 2 PETER: FAMOUS LAST WORDS.

I have preached my way through the book of 2 Peter without difficulty. I took it at face value and I dare say that the congregation was content for me to treat it at that level. It is inspiring and encouraging, although rarely visited from the pulpit. However, dig beneath the surface and you find unanswered questions which complicate a clear view of the book's origins. Ben Witherington III exaggerates, but not much, when he announces that "Second Peter is a mystery wrapped in an enigma cloaked in a conundrum."ⁱ Surprisingly, given the doubts that have been cast on it down the years, a close examination of the book and its birth in Rome can lead us to a greater appreciation of its inspirational qualities. And yes, even if my conclusions are slightly tentative, I believe I may be able to persuade you to love 2 Peter.

An Awkward Journey into the New Testament Canon

2 Peter appears to have been known from a relatively early time, if not widely circulated. Origen possessed it and used it, citing it as being by Peter who also wrote the first Epistle. However, he admitted that there are questions concerning its authenticity.ⁱⁱ The *Letter to Theodorus* strongly suggests that Clement of Alexandria possessed it. We look in vain for hints of it in Irenaeus, Tertullian or Cyprian and it does not appear in what portions we have of the Muratorian Canon. It is safe to assert that the Alexandrian church was using it by 200AD, although some in the wider church had concerns about its authenticity.

Eusebius acknowledged that it was disputed by some, although many found it profitable and he himself seemed content to include it in the canon: "One epistle of Peter, that called the first, is acknowledged as genuine. And this the ancient elders used freely in their own writings as an undisputed work. But we have learned that his extant second Epistle does not belong to the canon; yet, as it has appeared profitable to many, it has been used with the other Scriptures with the only reservation that it was disputed by some."ⁱⁱⁱ Jerome thought that it was written by a different amanuensis and he was, perhaps, ambivalent to the Petrine authorship altogether.^{iv} Luther thought it might have been written by Peter while Calvin suggested authorship by a disciple at Peter's direction. Erasmus believed it was either spurious or written by Silvanus.

The date from which it was known is crucial evidence for its authenticity. Bauckham notes that 1 Clement, 2 Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas show closest affinity to 2 Peter, suggesting a date 80-100 AD.^v The document known as Papyrus 72 is a codex containing Jude, 1 Peter and 2 Peter dating from Egypt in the 3rd or 4th century, demonstrates that 2 Peter must have been known and achieved acceptance some time before this. Interestingly enough there is no doubt that the *Apocalypse of Peter* (110-140AD) and the *Acts of Peter* (180) knew it. This, I believe, indicates an early acceptance by the wider church. There were various apocryphal works claiming to be by Peter, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Preaching of Peter*, the *Acts of Peter*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*, all of them rejected as authentic by the Fathers.. Guthrie argues that "the fact that it ultimately gained acceptance in spite of the pseudo-Petrine literature is an evidence more favourable to its authenticity than against it,"^{vi}

The Early Church Fathers were rigorous in their selection of what we now call the New Testament. The examination to which 2 Peter was subjected is more a proof of their thoroughness rather than its integrity. Although there were difficulties in proving its authenticity, it was never proven to be inauthentic. As Michael Green comments: "No book of the Canon is so poorly attested among the Fathers, yet no excluded book has nearly such weight of backing as 2 Peter."^{vii}

An Asian Style of Language

Here we come to the biggest difficulty. Almost all the commentaries will expand on the linguistic uniqueness of 2 Peter: "Out of a total of 401 different words, some 57 words are found nowhere else in the New Testament, half of these do not occur in the LXX, half of the rest are unknown in early Jewish literature and at least three words [akatapaustos empaignomone, paraphronia meaning unrestrainable, mockery, madness] occur nowhere else in all of Greek literature before or during this period."^{viii} It is quite repetitive in its language and there are almost no Semitisms in it. It is the singularity of style more than anything which leads the majority of theologians, not a few of them from even the evangelical camp, to believe that it was not written by the same person as 1 Peter. It is usually considered to be post-apostolic, and pseudographical.

I have to say that even my limited Bible College NT Greek has taught me to appreciate the different styles between, say, Luke-Acts and Paul, Mark and John, Revelation and the rest of the New Testament. This book is one where the very odd style is crucial and helps us date when the book was written and how it was

put together. However, those of us without a profound knowledge of the varying styles of first century Greek prose and rhetoric find ourselves at the mercy of the experts who, typically, do not agree among themselves. This is my attempt to precis an argument which is amply treated by the various commentaries and introductions.

The book's contents were not the reason for the doubts about its canonicity. Its apocalyptic eschatology seems rather strange and its obvious similarities with Jude are unsettling, but I doubt if the early readers would have worried unduly about that. No, the early Greek-speaking readers, who were the large majority in those days, were puzzled by its linguistic style. Even given that the New Testament writers almost certainly used scribes in writing their epistles, the linguistic differences between 1 and 2 Peter are huge. Some of the Early Church Fathers struggled to include it in their authentic New Testament because it was difficult for them to believe that it was penned by the same author as 1 Peter. It is written in the 'Asiatic' style of Greek Rhetoric^{ix} which was coming into fashion in 2 Peter's time, and which, with its "love of high-sounding expressions, florid and verbose language, and elaborate literary effects, was an artificial style which . . . compares with European baroque."^x This style was becoming popular in the later second half of the First Century and you will not find any other examples in the New Testament, although Witherington does find a faint reflection of it in 1 Peter. Most certainly it is not the style in which Silvanus, the scribe of the first epistle wrote and it is "far removed from the language of daily life."^{xi} Bo Reicke complains that "the *diction* of Second Peter is peculiar and hard to understand. Long sentences are joined together with disregard for the balance and clarity required by classical taste. Elaborate and exquisite constructions are used by choice, instead of those simple, concrete expressions and colloquial features characteristic of the gospels and other New Testament writings."^{xii}

Although Bauckham claims it is possible that 1 and 2 Peter have the same author because the differences of terminology and ideas are more striking than differences of grammatical usage and style of writing,^{xiii} only a small minority of experts in the area of first century Greek literature believe that the author of 2 Peter is the same as that of 1 Peter. So what are the possibilities? It could be that this is by an author pretending to be Peter (pseudographic), or maybe it was dictated by Peter himself using a different scribe who had a love of the Asian style of Greek and felt that this is how it should sound. It could be a composite document or it could be a radical rewrite of an earlier document. Before we examine that we need to consider briefly its relationship to Jude.

Relationship to the Book of Jude

The relationship between 2 Peter chapter 2 and Jude is obvious. Nineteen out of 25 of Jude's verses exist in some form or other in 2 Peter. The material is in the same order, although Jude arranges his arguments a little more neatly (in a 'midrashic' structure) and contains references to the books of *1 Enoch* and *The Assumption of Moses* which Peter omits along with many of the Old Testament references. All the commentaries and introductions treat this subject in depth and I have gone into some detail on my *Learning to Love the Book of Jude* article on this website. The possibilities seem to be:

- 1) Peter used Jude as the basis for chapter 2.
- 2) Jude used Peter as the basis for the middle section of his Epistle.
- 3) They both used a common source, a polemic against dangerous usurpers of the Faith
- 4) Either Jude or Peter wrote both books

The idea that either Jude or Peter wrote both books is hard to maintain, given the difference in style between them. Luther was one of the older commentators who felt that Jude had used 2 Peter, but this is not a popular point of view today. Jude seems neater and more comprehensive than Peter. The majority today favour the primacy of Jude, Peter having summarised it for his own account. Michael Green makes a case for both of them using a document already in circulation.^{xiv} I am rather tempted by this explanation. Perhaps the leaders of the Palestinian churches put out a warning which Jude emphasised by publishing a letter in his own name, top and tailing it with a greeting and closing blessing. A copy of that original document found its way to Rome where Peter (or the later author of this Epistle) decided to incorporate it into 2 Peter. Feasible, but impossible to prove. I do not see how we can have any objection to Peter or Jude co-opting the material from each other or from a third source. We are comfortable with the books of Kings and Chronicles using pre-existent court chronicles. We are well accustomed to Luke incorporating various sources in his work and the Synoptic Gospels sharing common material.

It would help us to know who exactly this passage is aimed against. The Book of Revelation inveighs against those who hold to “the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality” (2:15), and also against the followers of a woman, dubbed Jezebel who misleads church members into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols (2:20). Paul, too, warns the Corinthians against sexual promiscuity and eating food sacrificed to idols. These groups and ideas seem to be fairly widespread so we can imagine all Christian authors wanting to warn against them. Maybe there was a tract in circulation, incorporated into two epistles to the churches

One point worth noting is Bauckham’s observation that “Second Peter’s style is so consistent that its author must in any case have rewritten his source fairly freely.”^{xv}

Authorship of Peter

2 Peter is not a pseudographical work. Plenty of those abounded in the second century and beyond, but the Early Church was unequivocal. None of them would be allowed into the canon of literature we call the New Testament. You will find in numerous older commentaries the view that such books were common in the ancient world, everyone knew about them and the Early Church would tolerate them. But we do not have any example of such works being knowingly incorporated into the canon. You may argue that they were duped into inclusion and that is a legitimate conversation to have, but they did not do so by choice.^{xvi} If the Early Church Fathers had known that it was a fake they would have rejected it. The fact that it was poorly attested and slow to permeate through the Empire made them cautious to incorporate it and some had severe doubts. In the end they could find no reason to reject it. The book of Hebrews shows us that a canonical work did not have to be written by an apostle or a member of the family of Jesus. As long as it had emerged from that apostolic circle an anonymous work was acceptable. As Serapion, Bishop of Antioch said: “for our part, bretheren, we revere both Peter and the other apostles as Christs, but the writings which falsely bear their names we reject”

Michaels tries to argue his way round this by saying “Posthumous publication in Peter’s name does not necessarily imply any intent to deceive. If the tradition behind Second Peter is genuinely Petrine [at least in part], then the only kind of compiler of this material who might be guilty of deception would be one who presumptuously signed his own name to the apostle’s teaching. This testament, however, frankly calls itself a “second” or “secondary” epistle (3.1), a designation that perhaps glances back not at First Peter or at a lost epistle but precisely at the traditional Petrine teachings out of which Second Peter is built.”^{xvii} In other words, these are Peter’s idea and this is a genuine representation of them. Ignoring the fact that no other translator that I can find uses the word ‘secondary’ in 3.1, this is a halfway position between pseudographia and an Epistle by Peter himself. Martin concurs: “If the author wrote the document to embody the apostle’s teaching and had no intention of deceiving his readers, the writer of 2 Peter is no imposter.”^{xviii} Reicke goes slightly further by arguing that its readers must have expected it to be slightly fictional but trusted it anyway: “If they knew that it came from the Petrine circle in Rome, then they might trust its author to have made a good job of reporting the essence of Peter’s teaching, but they would not expect Peter to have written it.”^{xix} This is a modern version of a view put forward by Robson in 1915 who argued that it is a composite document from various sources, mostly Petrine.^{xx}

I wonder however, what prevents us taking a further step and connecting it directly to Peter himself. Reicke seems to concur: “It is natural to believe that it was written with the knowledge and consent, or even at the direct request of the great apostle.”^{xxi} There may be a few clues. Firstly, the author calls himself Simeon Peter, not Simon Peter. Simeon is the original Hebrew name not used elsewhere for Peter in the New Testament except for 15:14 when James appeals especially to the Jewish hardliners and reminds them that Peter is ‘Simeon’ not ‘Simon’. One can imagine Peter himself reverting to his Hebrew name in his last testament, but not an author inventing a document in his name as this epistle is not specifically written to Jews. No pseudographical writer ever calls him ‘Simeon.’^{xxii} Secondly, later writings refer to Paul as ‘the blessed and glorious Paul’ (Polycarp, *Ad Phil iii*) ‘blessed Paul’ (1 Clement 47.1) ‘the sanctified Paul .. right blessed’ (Ignatius *Ad Eph* 12.2). Here is called ‘our beloved brother’, in a more natural tone that you might expect. Thirdly, he looks back to his presence at the Transfiguration rather than the Resurrection. It is hard to see why someone inventing a testament would ignore the Resurrection. Guthrie complains that “the claims of the Epistle itself are discounted by the majority of scholars on the grounds that these personal allusions are no more than a literary device to give the appearance of authenticity to a pseudonymous production.”^{xxiii} Of course if there were no personal allusions then the epistle would also be declared fake –

an example of ‘you’re damned if you do, you’re damned if you don’t.’ I think we can argue that the allusions are consistent with a personal connection.

So who wrote it? If the style precludes Peter did he perhaps order it to be written? Witherington does find some similarities with 1 Peter.^{xxiv} Maybe he dictated it to a scribe and a later authority rewrote and circulated it. Witherington speculates that Linus, said by the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ca. 380AD) to have been ordained by Paul as the bishop of Rome, might have composed it.^{xxv} The key word here, of course, is ‘guess’. However, I think this discussion leads us on to a consideration of the content and social context of 2 Peter and a deeper respect for it than we might otherwise have had.

Famous Last Words to the Church

We have always been fascinated by the last words of famous people. The Jews of the inter-testamental period developed it into an art form of their own. There were: *Testament of Moses*, *Testament of the 12 Patriarchs*, *Testament of Job*, *1 Enoch* 91-104, *4 Ezra* 14:28-36, *2 Apocalypse of Baruch*, *Jub* 21-22, 35 36:1-18, *Biblical Antiquities* 19:1-5 24:1-5; 28:3-4, 5=10; 33; *Adam and Eve* 25-29 *Josephus Antiquities* 4.309-19. We should probably treat them rather like a midrash, where a verse from the Old Testament is elaborated on with an invented story. One assumes that the readers treated the “last words” as inspirational stories rather than historical notes. Encouragement for such final-sayings documents derives from the Bible of course. In Genesis 49 Jacob pronounces his final blessing over his sons, Moses blesses the tribes in Deuteronomy 33, Joshua bids farewell to the leaders in Joshua 23, David gives his final charge to Solomon in 1 Kings 2. The New Testament, too, loves a final address to the faithful. Jesus instructs the disciples in a final sermon in John 14-17, Paul says farewell to the Ephesian church elders in Acts 20 and bids us all goodbye in 2 Timothy.

How fitting, then, that Peter discharges us with his final words in 2 Peter. We would expect nothing less from a major figure of the salvation story. It refers to the past in personal tones and speaks to the future while addressing current concerns. The church in Rome would have jumped at the opportunity to possess such a document. Those current concerns give us the sense of the social and ecclesiastical setting in which it was composed. It seems to me that it fits perfectly into mid-century Rome and would prove invaluable to the church leadership. I say Rome with a fair degree of certainty. Duane Wilson says “Parallels in language and tradition with *1 Clement*, *2 Clement* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* are present, and their presence can be explained only if 2 Peter derives from the same Christian community in Rome.^{xxvi} This does not mean that the letter is pseudographic. Roman church leaders had authority to write in their own name, but facing the challenges of the dawn of the post-apostolic era the last words of Peter would have been a god-send. How important, then, to polish them up and use them as an exhortation to the wider church while commemorating the death of the great apostle who had recently been martyred in their midst.

Consider the predicament of the Roman church once the horrors of the Neronian persecution had died down. Bereft of their apostolic leadership except maybe for John, still alive but elderly in Asia, the new generation has to affirm its own credentials. Peter refers his listeners to “the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles (3.2).” The new generation built their authority on their link with just these apostles. It is a subtle reminder that despite their passing it was ‘business as usual’ in those uncertain times. There is no new doctrine to be offered. They are now the guardians of what has been handed down, a solemn task made all the more imperative for having come from Peter himself. The Roman leaders, maybe even Linus himself, felt empowered to stand in the succession of the apostles.^{xxvii}

There is a second element of the letter which speaks strongly into the situation of AD70-100, which is the need for a written authority. There is huge disagreement about the exact dating of the New Testament documents, but all agree that some, if not most, had been written and were beginning to circulate at this point. This is vital because if the new leaders are the guardians of the Faith, what exactly is the Faith? The Apostle Paul is seen trying to untangle the twisted threads of belief in the second coming in the Thessalonian church, the status of the law in the Galatian church, the importance of the Resurrection in the Corinthian church, the ‘Colossian Heresy’ in Colossians^{xxviii} and so on. Indeed, Peter himself has to add his own contribution in explaining why Jesus has not returned yet (3:8-10) because some were of the opinion that it was not just delayed, but would not happen at all. No surprise then that we are drawn to the authority of what is written, not just the prophetic writings of what we now call the Old Testament, but also the new writings of the apostles and family of Jesus. The prophecies are God-inspired (1:21) and by implication so are the other, contemporary writings (3:15,16: *graphai* in Greek, which literally just means ‘writings’ but is also the term used for ‘Scriptures’). In case there is any doubt we are reminded that Paul writes with the wisdom

which God gave him. These are inspired epistles. The Church holds the library of apostolic writings as a sacred treasure and standard of truth. Their possession strengthens the Church's authority.

And its authority needs strengthening. The fact that 2:1-22 appears in slightly different form in Jude tells us that times were dangerous. The apostles were bequeathing churches infused with a wide range of opinions and teachings, always vulnerable to strong personalities and self-seekers. The violent rhetoric and furious denunciations tell us little about the actual false beliefs in circulation but a huge amount about the anxiety of the leadership of the time. They were seriously concerned. The battle was on. I suspect that the absence of detail is a deliberate omission because the misguided groups were such a diverse mix of moral lapses, doctrinal confusion and social position-seekers. So Peter reminds everyone of the true qualities needed to remain afloat in troubled seas: "For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:8)." And the believers are reminded that they must remain resolute in face of all these difficulties: "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble (1:10)."

2 Peter is a testament, but it is also a letter to the post-apostolic church. How much of it was written, dictated or ordered by Peter himself we will never know. I suspect that chapter 2 has been drafted in by the later editor and rewritten in his own style. We will never know for sure.

Conclusions

This epistle seems to me to fit so perfectly into the Roman leadership of the second half of the first century that it inspires me. Ultimately it was this link which assured its place in the New Testament canon. The explosion in the number of new churches and denominations across the world in general, but especially in South America, sub-Saharan Africa and the Far East replicate the early years of the Christian Church as it spread into the Europe, entered the towns and villages of the Asian areas of the Roman Empire, and moved like a slow tide along the north coast of Africa. Are there problems? Indeed there are: strange teachings, abusive leaders, arguments and divisions. What we have in 2 Peter is the great apostle who has travelled the Empire bidding farewell from Rome and preparing a new generation of Christians as best he can to face the unknown future. At the heart of his message is Jesus: "At the heart of 2 Peter is a profound and passionate declaration of the divine justice, authority, and glory of Jesus Christ revealed in the transfiguration of his imminent glorious coming that will purify and transform all of creation and make it the home of righteousness, and of the absurdity and indeed great danger of the heresies that deny these truths."^{xxix}

We also have a letter that was treasured by the church in which it was born. They may well have deemed it too important a document to leave in its original form, but I am as sure as I can be that they oversaw its remodelling into a final edition. They would have overseen its distribution to the further provinces who had received the first letter of Peter. It is this role in a crucial period of church history which leads me to love this book. I hope it works for you too.

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Bible Unzipped
North Wales March 2019

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- ⁱ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians, Volume II. A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1-2 Peter* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, USA; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), p. 260.
- ⁱⁱ Quoted by Eusebius in 6:25.8. "Peter . . . ,has left one acknowledged epistle; perhaps also a second, but this is doubted."
- ⁱⁱⁱ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.3.1
- ^{iv} *Epis.* 120.11
- ^v Richard J. Bauckham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), p.150.
- ^{vi} Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction, 3rd Ed., revised* (London: IVP, 1974), p.818.
- ^{vii} Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: IVP, 1968), p.13.
- ^{viii} Witherington, *op. cit.*, p.260.
- ^{ix} Commentators find obvious delight in quoting this extreme example of an inscription by Antiochus of Commagene in the first century AD " It was as being of all things good not only a most reliable acquisition, but also – for human beings – a most pleasant enjoyment that I considered piety; and the same conviction I held to be the reason for a most successful authority as well as for a most blessed employment thereof; furthermore, during my entire lifetime I appeared to all in my monarchy as one who regarded holiness as both a most trustworthy safeguard and an inimitable satisfaction.."
- ^x Bauckham, *op. cit.*, p.137.
- ^{xi} Witherington *op.cit.*, p. 265, quoting Wilbert Francis Howard in James Hope Moulton, Wilbert Francis Howard and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906-1976) Vol 2:5-6.
- ^{xii} Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*. The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964) p. 146.
- ^{xiii} Bauckham, *op. cit.*, p.145.
- ^{xiv} Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: IVP, 1968), pp. 49; 50-55.
- ^{xv} Bauckham, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
- ^{xvi} Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians Volume 1: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 'On Roasting Old Chestnuts: The Issue of Epistolary Pseudepigrapha,' pp.23-37.
- ^{xvii} Glenn W. Barker, William L. Lane and J Ramsay Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1969), p.352.
- ^{xviii} Ralph P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations Vol.2 Acts-Revelation* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press,1978) p. 386.
- ^{xix} Reicke, *op.cit.* p.134.
- ^{xx} E. I. Robson *Studies in the Second Epistle of St. Peter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915) pp. 9-14.
- ^{xxi} Reicke, *op. cit.*, p.71.
- ^{xxii} See Guthrie, *op.cit.*, p.828.
- ^{xxiii} Guthrie, *op.cit.*, p. 821.
- ^{xxiv} Witherington, *op. cit.*, p.264. See also G.H. Boobyer, "The indebtedness of 2 Peter to 1 Peter," *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of T.W. Manson*. Ed. A.J.B. Higgins (Manchester: University Press, 1959) pp. 34-53.
- ^{xxv} Witherington. *Op. cit.*, p.282.
- ^{xxvi} ." Duane F. Wilson, 'The Second Letter of Peter,' *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol XII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) p. 328. See also Bauchham, *op. cit.*, p. 150: "The similarities between the four works most probably indicate their common indebtedness to a tradition of Roman Christianity."
- ^{xxvii} David G Meade *Pseudonymity and Canon: an investigation into the relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition, Volume 1* Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 39 (Tubingen: Mohr, 1986) p. 186. "As the last words of Peter, they are intended to make provision for the continuance of his "apostolic" doctrine in this absence."
- ^{xxviii} If such specific heresy existed. See my article on Colossians on this website.
- ^{xxix} Douglas Harink, *1 & 2 Peter* (London: SCM Press, 2009) p.23