Authorship of 2 Peter

Second Peter leaves no doubt that it is to be read as correspondence from the apostle Peter (see 1:1, 17–18). Nevertheless, it is considered to be pseudepigraphical by almost all New Testament scholars, including many who are reluctant to grant the pseudepigraphy of other New Testament writings.

Majority View: Author is Unknown

The letter that we know as 2 Peter actually refers to 1 Peter as an earlier correspondence (2 Pet. 3:1). Accordingly, scholars who believe that 1 Peter is pseudepigraphical, written after Peter's death, will logically conclude that 2 Peter too must be pseudepigraphical, written later than 1 Peter and therefore also after Peter's death. But what if 1 Peter is not pseudepigraphical? Then the problem is that 1 Peter and 2 Peter are so different from each other that most interpreters conclude that they could not have been written by the same person (thus if 1 Peter is not pseudepigraphical, 2 Peter must be). The differences are not just matters of language and style (which might be explained by the employment of two different scribes) but also extend to theology and overall tone. For example, 1 Peter urges not returning abuse for abuse and being open to outsiders (3:9), whereas 2 Peter relies on polemic and innuendo to vilify opponents (e.g., 2:12–22).

The author of 2 Peter usually is assumed to have had a copy of the Letter of Jude, and many scholars think that Jude was written sometime after Peter's death. Even if Jude was written a few years before Peter's martyrdom, it seems unlikely that Peter would have obtained a copy of that letter so soon after it was written. Also, the letter appears to be written from a very Hellenistic viewpoint that does not fit well with what we would expect of Peter, the Galilean fisherman who was prominent in the Jerusalem church and became known as an apostle to Jews (Gal. 2:7–8). For example, 2 Peter describes salvation as becoming "participants of the divine nature" (1:4), and the letter refers to rebellious angels being imprisoned in "Tartarus" (most English translations: "hell"), the realm of the underworld in Greek mythology (2:4).

The letter refers to a skepticism that has arisen among Christians who note that the promise of Christ's coming has not been fulfilled (3:4). Most scholars think that this sort of problem would have arisen after the deaths of Jesus's followers (including Peter). Furthermore, the author responds to this skepticism by indicating that the parousia could still be thousands of years away (3:8). Scholars do not think it likely that Peter or anyone else in the first generation of believers would have developed such a nuanced stance toward the second coming; other evidence indicates that the first Christians expected Jesus to return very soon (1 Cor. 7:26, 29–31; 1 Thess. 4:13–17; Heb. 10:37; James 5:8; 1 Pet. 4:7; cf. Mark 13:30).

The letter speaks of apostolic tradition as a norm to be defended: the readers are told to remain "established in the truth that has come to you" (1:12) and to remember "the commandments of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles" (3:2). Some interpreters take these references as implying a virtual equation of "what is true" with "what is apostolic," a notion of authority that did not take hold in the church until the second century. Furthermore, the author refers to these apostles as though they are a group to which he does not himself belong. If the apostle Peter were actually writing this letter, wouldn't he tell them to remember "the commandments of the Lord and Savior spoken through *us*"?

The letter makes an explicit reference to the deaths of "our ancestors" (3:4), which most scholars take to mean "the apostles" or "the first generation of Christians." If it does mean that, then 2 Peter almost certainly would be pseudepigraphical, written after the death of Peter (one of the ancestors). It is possible, however, that the word "ancestors" is used here to mean "all those who have gone before us" or refers to Jewish ancestors from biblical history.

In 2 Peter 3:15–16, Paul's letters are referred to as a group of writings that are being studied and interpreted in divergent ways within the church. Furthermore, the author of 2 Peter regards those letters as Scripture and assumes that his readers think of them as Scripture also. But scholars do not believe that the letters of Paul were copied or collected in a way that would allow them to have

received this sort of attention during the lifetime of Peter (i.e., during the lifetime of Paul himself, who was martyred at the same time as Peter, ca. 64–65). Furthermore, scholars do not think that Paul's letters were regarded as Scripture until many years after the passing of Peter and Paul.

The letter shifts back and forth between use of the future tense, when it presents Peter predicting things that will happen after his death (2:1–3; 3:1–4), and the present tense, when it addresses its readers as though those predictions are now coming true (2:10–22; 3:5–7). The strong impression is that the letter is intended for Christians who live a generation or so after Peter's death (during the time when the predictions are coming true). Most interpreters think it more likely that a pseudonymous author wrote a letter to address those believers "in Peter's name," rather than that Peter himself wrote such a letter proleptically.

The letter had considerable trouble gaining recognition and acceptance within the church, something that would not have happened if there had been confidence that it actually had been written by Peter. Indeed, 2 Peter is never even mentioned in church writings until the third century, and then it is alluded to only in a writing from the Eastern church (by Origen of Alexandria) that questions its legitimacy. It is not mentioned in the Western church until the fourth century, and then again, it comes up only as a "disputed" writing.

If 2 Peter is not pseudepigraphical, we certainly would want to know how a letter written in Rome by Peter during his last days (1:14–15) could be either ignored or rejected by Christians in that city for more than three hundred years. This question becomes even more pointed when we realize that the contents of the letter would have served the interests of the Roman church well (which could explain why the letter eventually was accepted).

This letter appears to have been regarded with suspicion and used with caution for one reason only: it was widely regarded as pseudepigraphical. The only writings by Christians that appear to have drawn on 2 Peter in these first few centuries are two apocryphal writings, the *Apocalypse of Peter* (ca. 110–140) and the *Acts of Peter* (ca. 180), both of which also claim to have been written by the apostle.

Finally, 2 Peter is usually thought to belong to the literary genre of "testament," and all testaments were, by definition, pseudepigraphical. A testament is a work that presents a fictive "deathbed speech" of some famous person from the past, addressing issues of the day. The idea is to apply the perspective and insights of the past individual to current events; ancient readers who understood this genre of literature did not imagine that the work offered the literal words of the historical individual (as though some long-lost writing by that person had just been discovered). In 2 Peter

we find all the standard literary conventions of a testament, with the exception that it is cast in the form of a letter.

Minority View: Supporters of Authenticity

A few scholars dispute the accuracy or significance of the points listed above, insisting that a case can be made for regarding 2 Peter as having been written by the apostle Peter.

- D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, "2 Peter," in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 654–68, esp. 661–63.
- Donald Guthrie, "The Second Epistle of Peter," in *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 805–57, esp. 820–42.
- Michael Green, *2 Peter Reconsidered* (London: Tyndale, 1961).
- Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, AB 37 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964).