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Authorship of 1 Peter

In the 1950s and 1960s, the great majority of New Testament scholars regarded 1 Peter as an obviously pseudepigraphical writing, but that judgment was based on arguments that would be deemed inconclusive today.

Arguments for Pseudepigraphy That No Longer Hold Up

- *Argument*: The sufferings referred to in 1 Peter are references to state-sponsored, empirewide persecutions, which did not occur during the apostle Peter's lifetime.
- *Rebuttal*: There is now widespread recognition that the letter is addressing suffering of another kind (harassment and abuse from neighbors), which could have been experienced almost anytime, anywhere.
- *Argument*: The relatively refined Greek of 1 Peter is beyond what we would expect of a Galilean fisherman (cf. Acts 4:13). The author, furthermore, cites Old Testament passages from the Septuagint without, apparently, consulting the Hebrew Bible. He also demonstrates some knowledge of Greco-Roman rhetorical practices.
- *Rebuttal*: Most modern scholars recognize that letter writers in the ancient world often employed professional scribes who were

responsible for the actual composition, conveying what the author wanted to say in a more polished style than the author might have been able to produce. This was particularly true when the author was a person of prominence (as Peter would have been) who was writing an official communication like this one (a circular letter to multiple churches). Furthermore, many scholars now contend that a well-traveled man like Peter could have had much more facility with Greek than was previously thought.

- *Argument*: The numerous parallels between 1 Peter and other New Testament books are evidence that the author of 1 Peter had read some of those books. Thus 1 Peter must be one of the last books of the New Testament to have been written, and accordingly, it could not have been written by the apostle, who died in the mid-60s.
- *Rebuttal*: Today most scholars think that the parallels can be attributed to mutual use of shared traditions (catechetical and liturgical materials). Furthermore, the connections most suggestive of direct literary dependence are ones that do not necessarily pose any problem for Petrine authorship. It is often noted that 1 Peter uses a number of “Paulinisms,” distinctive words and expressions usually associated with Paul; for example, the expression “in Christ” is used 164 times by Paul but does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament except here, in 1 Peter, where it turns up three times (3:16; 5:10, 14). That is

interesting, but it is not particularly relevant for the question of authorship, since there is no reason why Peter, in Rome, could not have read Paul's letter to the Romans and picked up some "Paulinisms" from that. Or he might have been influenced by Paul's former colleagues Silvanus and Mark, who, he says, are currently with him (5:12–13).

The major arguments that once led scholars to regard 1 Peter as pseudepigraphical have thus been discounted, and authorship by the apostle has increasingly come to be regarded as a viable option. The matter is still disputed by many (probably most) scholars, but with a different tenor than before. Almost everyone will at least admit that 1 Peter is not certainly or obviously pseudepigraphical.

Factors Favoring 1 Peter as a Work Produced during Peter's Lifetime

The encouragement to honor the emperor would make more sense before the persecutions under Nero than afterward: How could any Christian write words describing the Roman emperor as a promoter of justice (2:13–14) in the years after Peter's martyrdom, much less attribute those words retroactively to Peter himself? The confident declaration that the end of the ages is near (4:7; cf. 1:5; 4:17) also suggests the perspective of a first-generation Christian.

Factors Suggesting That 1 Peter Comes from a Time after Peter's Death

The use of “Babylon” as an epithet for Rome (5:13) did not become popular among Jews and Christians until after 70 CE, when Rome destroyed the Jerusalem temple, just as Babylon had destroyed an earlier temple in 587 BCE. A later date for 1 Peter also allows more time for various Christian trajectories to have synthesized into the common tradition that we find expressed in the letter. A later date also allows more time for the churches in Asia Minor to have developed into the established institutions that they appear to be.

Specific Proposals That Have Been Offered

Wayne Grudem suggests that, contrary to church tradition, Peter survived the Neronian persecution and wrote the letter sometime later (in the 70s?) with former colleagues of the deceased Paul now helping him.¹

E. G. Selwyn suggests that Silvanus (cf. 1 Pet. 5:12) shaped some fragmentary themes and exhortations of Peter’s into a coherent letter after the apostle’s death.²

Leonhard Goppelt suggests that the Roman church in the 80s had become so identified with Petrine tradition that it felt it could speak to other churches “with the mind of Peter” (and thus in his name).³

The Central Argument Today: Is the Letter Compatible with What Is Known of Peter?

The main question for most modern scholars is whether what is presented in 1 Peter is consistent with what we know of Peter’s post-

Easter life and teachings. There are things in the letter that do not match perfectly with what is said of Peter elsewhere in the New Testament. But how significant are these matters? And can they be explained?

There are the two most frequently cited examples.

Apostle to the Jews, Not to the Gentiles

Paul describes Peter as the “apostle to the circumcised” (Gal. 2:7–8), indicating that Peter was more focused on ministry to Jews than to gentiles; it is a little odd, then, that Peter would be writing a letter to gentile Christians. Still, we should not take Paul’s remark as providing us with some kind of permanent or binding job description for Peter. Elsewhere, we do hear that Peter was involved in church work at Antioch (Gal. 2:11–12) and at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12; 9:5), which seems to imply some level of commitment to ministry among gentiles (and see Acts 10:1–11:18; 15:6–11).

No Mention of the Incident at Antioch

Paul refers to a confrontation he had with Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11–14), alleging that Peter acted hypocritically out of fear. One might think that Peter (writing also to the Galatians, among others) would now want to set the record straight and offer his version of what happened. But there is no mention in 1 Peter of the Antioch incident, nor is there any discussion of the issues that provoked it. That seems odd to some interpreters, but, of course, such an omission could simply indicate that the controversy had passed, or

that Peter and Paul had reconciled, or that Peter had accepted Paul's rebuke and now agreed with him. It could even be that Peter, following his own advice, simply chose not to return "abuse for abuse" (1 Pet. 3:9; cf. 2:23).

Where does this leave us? We do not really know very much about Peter's post-Easter career or teaching, save for the fact that he was a missionary who traveled with his wife (1 Cor. 9:5), that he was highly respected as a leader in the church (Gal. 1:18; 2:9), and that many people traced their identity in Christ to his ministry or influence (1 Cor. 1:12; cf. Acts 2:41; 4:4; 8:25). He does not seem to have been regarded as an innovative theologian or as one who was clearly identified with distinctive doctrines or practices. Even Paul seems to regard him as a key player in the church who is just one among many who are all basically doing the same thing: proclaiming the true gospel of Christ (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:22; 15:11).

The bottom line seems to be this: there is nothing in 1 Peter that necessitates it having been written by the apostle Peter; at the same time, there is nothing in the letter that makes authorship by Peter impossible.

The Two Key Factors Influencing Decisions

In adjudicating this question, two factors inevitably come to the fore.

The Degree of Confidence That Can Be Placed in Traditions of the Early Church

Scholars who view church tradition as “innocent unless proven guilty” usually judge 1 Peter to be an authentic composition of the apostle Peter (the problems raised are not sufficient to undermine a unanimous and early tradition of the church). Scholars who think that the early church often got such things wrong tend to think that the letter probably is pseudepigraphical.

The Attitude That the Early Church Took Toward Pseudepigraphy

Scholars who think that Christians in the early church usually regarded pseudepigraphy as a spurious or dishonest practice usually view 1 Peter as an authentic composition of the apostle Peter (the problems raised are outweighed by the unlikelihood of respected Christians in the first century producing a fraudulent work or managing to pull off such a hoax in a church that was cautious and watchful in that regard). Scholars who think that certain types of pseudepigraphy were widely accepted as honorable tend to see 1 Peter as pseudepigraphical (produced by disciples or admirers of Peter for a church that welcomed such postmortem contributions).

The Significance of the Question

The significance of whether 1 Peter is to be regarded as authentic or pseudepigraphical is minimized by certain factors:

- The letter does not claim to present anything that only Peter could know (e.g., secret teachings imparted to him by Jesus). The apocryphal writings attributed to Peter in later centuries often do make such a claim.
- Both defenders of authenticity and proponents of pseudonymity agree that the letter presents Peter's own thoughts (or, at least, thoughts consistent with the tradition in which he stood); they also agree that those thoughts have been cast into language different from that which Peter himself typically would have used (either by an amanuensis during his lifetime or by disciples after his death).
- The question of authorship need not be resolved to understand the letter's message, which is fairly general and intended to deal with issues faced by Christians "in all the world" (5:9).

Nevertheless, a few specific passages in this letter attain a special poignancy if written by the man Peter who actually walked with Jesus.

In 5:1, the author refers to himself as "a witness of the sufferings of Christ." This could simply mean that he is one who can testify faithfully to the sufferings that Christ bore and that others bear for him. The disciple Peter, however, may have meant this in a more literal sense: he speaks as one who was actually present to witness Christ's suffering firsthand (cf. 2:23).

In 1:8, the author writes, “Although you have not seen (Jesus), you love him.” The words might strike readers differently if written by someone who, unlike them, has in fact seen Jesus face-to-face.

In short, the question of whether 1 Peter is pseudepigraphical perhaps is irrelevant for understanding the book’s theological message, but the question could be significant for appreciation of the work’s emotional impact or sentimental appeal.

1. See Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 10–11; cf. J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC 49 (Waco: Word, 1988), lvii–lxvii.

2. See E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 2nd ed., TC (1947; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1981), 9–17.

3. See Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, trans. John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 51–52.