

Lesson 8

Introduction to Second Peter

I. Who wrote 2 Peter?

A. That question sounds like “Who is buried in Grant’s tomb?”, but there has been much debate over the authorship of 2 Peter. From one perspective it is the most disputed book in the New Testament as to authenticity. From another perspective, the issue of authorship is already settled, at least negatively.

1. Most conservative scholars hold to the traditional view that Peter was the author, but modern critics have almost unanimously concluded that Peter could not possibly have been the author.
2. For example, one critic states that 2 Peter is “perhaps the most dubious writing” in the New Testament. Another says, “virtually none believe that 2 Peter was written by Jesus’ chief disciple.” It has been called “the most problematical of all the New Testament epistles.”
3. If one were inclined to doubt the authenticity of any letter in the New Testament, it would be 2 Peter. If the book were anonymous, it is doubtful that anyone would ever have thought of Peter as its author. But, as I hope to show, one is not sacrificing intellectual honesty in believing that 2 Peter is an authentic letter from the Apostle Peter. In fact, it is still the most credible position.
4. I think we will find that the extremely negative views of some critics of this letter tell us much more about the critics than they tell us about 2 Peter.

B. The result of this debate is that 2 Peter is concluded by most modern critical scholars to be what is called pseudepigraphal literature – that is, literature written using someone else’s name, usually some great figure from the past. Further, they argue that this was standard practice in the early church and not considered dishonest.

1. But was pseudepigraphy really an accepted practice? Paul didn’t seem to think so.
 - a) Paul criticized false writings in his name in 2 Thessalonians 2:2. Also, in Galatians 6:11, Colossians 4:18, 2 Thessalonians 3:17, and Philemon 1:19, Paul said that he was writing those sections with his own hand. Why would he say this? No doubt someone was circulating letters in his name, and he signed these letters himself to establish their authenticity.

2. There is no evidence that pseudepigraphy was an accepted practice at any time in the church's history. In fact we know that other letters bearing Peter's name were rejected by the early church. The so-called "Gospel of Peter" for example was rejected in AD 180 in Antioch because it was not authentic. Clearly the early church was not inclined to accept a document just because it had Peter's name on it.
3. Sadly, some conservative commentators argue that it is possible to simultaneously believe that Peter did not write this letter and that the Bible is inerrant. To establish that point they must of course show that the first verse of the book would not have been understood as a claim of authorship by the early church, even though the evidence suggests that just the opposite is true.
4. One commentator has stated: "No one ever seems to have accepted a document as religiously prescriptive that was known to be forged. I do not know a single example."
5. We must choose – either the Apostle Peter wrote 2 Peter or our Bibles include a deceptive forgery.

C. External Evidence Regarding Authorship

1. There is no indisputable external evidence prior to Origen (185–254) indicating who wrote 2 Peter. Origen himself mentions that there were some doubts as to its authenticity, but he himself cited the book six times, which suggests he did not take the doubts seriously.
2. Eusebius (260–340) noted that the book was disputed, but he also indicated that the majority accepted it. Jerome (347–420) also accepted 2 Peter as authentic.
3. "There is no evidence from any part of the early church that this epistle was ever rejected as spurious, in spite of the apparent hesitancy that existed over its reception."
4. Many commentators argue that there is no trace at all of the book's existence prior to AD 200.
 - a) But recent studies suggest there are at least 22 allusions to the book in the 2nd century writings of the so-called "Apostolic Fathers," with the level of likelihood ranging from "merely possible to highly probable."
 - b) As with many Biblical claims that were once doubted but later proved correct, it may be the case that not all of the

external evidence on this issue is in yet. Those who have bet against the Bible have had a miserable track record so far!

5. It seems that the reason there were doubts about 2 Peter is because Gnostics were circulating letters with Peter's name on them to try to gain acceptance for their false doctrines. Consequently, the orthodox church was probably suspicious of any letter attributed to Peter. That 2 Peter was accepted into the canon in spite of these suspicions argues favorably towards its authenticity.

6. Another possibility for its slower acceptance is that it may not have been as widely circulated as 1 Peter because 1 Peter dealt with a problem facing a much broader group than did 2 Peter. It is very likely that far fewer copies were initially made of 2 Peter than were made of 1 Peter.

D. Internal Evidence Regarding Authorship

1. There are numerous personal references in the letter.

a) There is no doubt that the author of the letter intended his readers to understand that he was the apostle Peter.

b) But a quote from one critic reveals the typical attitude towards these references:

(1) "That the author wants to be identified with the apostle Peter and as the writer also of 1 Peter is clear [from] his claiming to be present at the transfiguration, his reference to Paul as 'our beloved brother,' his pretending to be about ready to die as Jesus predicted, and his professing to be an eyewitness to Jesus."

(2) Critics see these personal references as forced attempts to gain acceptance, and thus treat them as further evidence that the letter is a fake. But, of course, the critics would reach the same conclusion if the letter contained none of these personal references!

c) The reference to Paul as "our beloved brother" in 3:15 is especially interesting because this is not the typical reference a second century writer would make about an apostle. Their tendency was to venerate the apostles, not

show familiarity with them. The reference in 2 Peter is respectful, but gives no hint of inferiority.

d) In the opening verse, the author refers to himself with the Hebraic form of Peter's name. That form is found elsewhere only in Acts 15:14. Wouldn't one expect an imposter to use the same form of Peter's name found in the first book. This Hebraic form is not used by any of the other books bearing Peter's name, whether authentic or not.

e) In 1:14, Peter said that he was going to die soon. This reference would be quite unusual for a 2nd century author merely adopting Peter's name to make a point.

f) Even more telling are verses 16-18 where the author claims to be an eyewitness of the transfiguration.

(1) A pseudopigrapher would be expected to embellish the account, but there is no such embellishment here.

(2) For example, the "Gospel of Peter" is a 2nd century book that bears Peter's name but was rejected as a fraud by the early church. In that book's description of the resurrection of Christ, a voice rings out from Heaven during the night, the stone rolls back by itself, and two men descend from Heaven and enter the tomb. Then three men are seen coming out of the tomb and into the clouds. Then a cross comes out of the tomb and a voice asks "Hast thou preached to them that sleep?" The cross answers "Yea."

(3) In another 2nd century account, Jesus comes out of the tomb sitting on the shoulders of the angels Michael and Gabriel. There are no such embellishments in 2 Peter.

2. Another major basis of criticism is the stylistic differences between 1 Peter and 2 Peter.

a) One critic says, "The differences in style, vocabulary, and conception between 1 and 2 Peter are too great to be understood as the result of different secretaries, changing situation, or diverse audiences, but reflect different authors."

b) Indeed, there are differences between the two letters. The vocabulary of 1 Peter has only 153 words in common

with 2 Peter. The favorite terms of 2 Peter are not found in 1 Peter and vice versa.

(1) But what does this really tell us? 1 Timothy and Titus are about the same length as 1 and 2 Peter, and they have only 161 words in common.

(2) Another common criticism is the use of different words in 1 Peter (apokalypsis) and 2 Peter (parousia) to refer to the Lord's coming. However, Paul used the same two terms on separate occasions when writing 1 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians.

(3) The letters are really too short to make any firm conclusions based on the style of the letters or the word selection.

c) Another point of criticism is that the Greek of the first letter is said to be among the finest in the New Testament, while the Greek of the second is said to be among the worst. How can we account for that?

(1) One commentator says that the Greek in 2 Peter "is employed with the uneasy touch of one who has acquired the language in later life." Further, there are grammatical and stylistic hints of a Jewish mind at work.

(2) This combined Greek/Jewish style supports the authenticity of the book. The vast bulk of the 2nd century pseudepigrapha was written by Gentiles. If the author of 2 Peter is not Peter, then "he is both a brilliant forger and an inept one at the same time!" The best and simplest explanation is that the book is not a forgery at all, but an authentic letter from the apostle Peter.

d) Some also complain that the letter is filled with language and concepts from the Greek world that would be unknown to a Galilean fisherman. But Peter lived in the Greek world, and he had been teaching and preaching in that world for years. Also, this letter was directed to people in that world. What language and concepts would we expect Peter to use?

e) Modern critics of the Bible delight in telling us all about what the first century authors knew or didn't know or what they would have done or not done. But how do they know? The answer most of the time is that they do not know; they

just act like they know. But *confident* ignorance is still just ignorance.

f) C. S. Lewis wrote an excellent article entitled “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism.” In it he listed four criticisms about modern critics of the Bible.

(1) Criticism #1: “These men ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old text; the evidence is their obvious inability to read the lines themselves. They claim to see fern-seed and can’t see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight.”

(2) Criticism #2: “The idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language, shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages, is in my opinion preposterous.”

(3) Criticism #3: “The canon ‘If miraculous, unhistorical’ is one they bring to their study of the texts, not one they have learned from it. If one is speaking of authority, the united authority of all the Biblical critics in the world counts here for nothing. On this they speak simply as men; men obviously influenced by, and perhaps insufficiently critical of, the spirit of the age they grew up in.”

(4) Criticism #4: “What forearms me against all these Reconstructions is the fact that I have seen it all from the other end of the stick. I have watched reviewers reconstructing the genesis of my own books in just this way. ... Reviewers ... will dash you off such histories with great confidence; will tell you what public events had directed the author’s mind to this or that, what other authors had influenced him, what his over-all intention was, what sort of audience he principally addressed, why – and when – he did everything. ... My impression is that in the whole of my experience not one of these guesses has on any one point been right; that the method shows a record of 100% failure. You would expect that by mere chance they would hit as often as they miss. But it is my impression that they do no such thing. I can’t remember a single hit.”

(5) Elsewhere he notes: “The Biblical critics, whatever reconstructions they devise, can never be proved wrong. St. Mark is dead. When they meet St. Peter there will be more pressing matters to discuss.”

g) One possible explanation for the stylistic differences between 1 Peter and 2 Peter is that Peter used an amanuensis for 1 Peter but wrote 2 Peter himself or perhaps used a different amanuensis for that letter.

(1) “Amanuenses” is a Latin word that refers to a servant who acted as a secretary. 1 Peter 5:12 suggests that Peter used Silvanus for that purpose in writing his first letter.

(2) Paul also used secretaries. In fact, Tertius inserted his own greeting into the book of Romans at 16:22. (“I Tertius, who wrote this epistle, salute you in the Lord.”) At the end of 1 Corinthians (16:21) and Galatians (6:11), Paul indicates he is signing with his own hand, suggesting he used a secretary for the other portions of those books.

(3) But this raises a different issue – we know that Paul and Peter were inspired, but what about Tertius and Silvanus? The answer must be yes if (as appears to be the case) the secretaries produced more than a simple word for word transcription. We know, for example, that Tertius wrote an entire verse in Romans.

(4) But is this surprising? No. The inspired authors of the Bible have themselves been described as God’s amanuenses, and we know that they each brought different personalities, vocabularies, and skills to the task.

(5) What we know for sure is that the words in the original copies of the Bible were word-for-word and letter-for-letter the inspired word of God – however those words actually reached the page.

(6) Some argue today that the Bible is inspired “in a sense but not in sentence.” That is, the general ideas were inspired, but not the actual words. The Bible takes the opposite view of itself.

(a) In Matthew 22:32, Jesus based his entire argument on the tense of a single verb in Exodus 3:6.

(b) In Matthew 22:43, Jesus based his entire argument on a single word that appears in Psalm 110:1.

(c) In John 10:34, Jesus based his entire argument on a single word that appears in Psalm 82:6.

(d) In Matthew 5:18, Jesus said that not a single jot or tittle of the Mosaic law would pass away until all was accomplished. The jot was the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the tittle was a tiny stroke added to certain letters.

(e) In 1 Corinthians 2:13, Paul said “which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth.” Paul said he was conveying Spirit-given words, not just Spirit-given ideas.

(f) In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul said “when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God.”

(g) In Galatians 3:16, Paul based his entire argument on a single word in Genesis 13:15 being singular rather than plural.

(h) If the Bible is not inspired word-for-word, then these arguments by Jesus and Paul are meaningless.

h) In addition to stylistic differences, there are also differences between the two letters in doctrinal themes, but these differences are expected if (as in 1 and 2 Peter) the author is dealing with different problems.

(1) It is telling that the doctrines in 2 Peter are in perfect accord with the rest of the Bible. It is difficult to see what would have motivated an author to use a pseudonym in 2 Peter. Typically such books adopted a famous name to advance a novel or esoteric teaching. No such teaching is contained in 2 Peter.

i) Finally, not only are there differences, but there are also many similarities between 1 Peter and 2 Peter. One

commentator has noted that, despite the differences, "...no document in the New Testament is so like 1 Peter as 2 Peter."

3. One final issue we should consider here is the "Jude problem." The parallels between 2 Peter and Jude are striking.

a) Compare this excerpt from 2 Peter 2:

(1) For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment; ... And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrha into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly ... But chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government. Presumptuous are they, selfwilled, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities. Whereas angels, which are greater in power and might, bring not railing accusation against them before the Lord. But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption.

b) With this excerpt from Jude:

(1) And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire. Likewise also these filthy dreamers defile the flesh, despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities. Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee. But these speak evil of those things which they know not: but what they know naturally, as brute beasts, in those things they corrupt themselves.

c) How can we explain this similarity? It seems clear that one borrowed from the other, but who borrowed from whom?

d) Some say it makes more sense to say that Peter expanded on Jude because there would not have been a need for Jude if 2 Peter had already been written.

(1) Also, Jude contains Jewish material that Peter might not have wanted to include in a letter intended for a wider Gentile audience.

(2) One commentator even suggested that the first letter referred to in 2 Peter 3:1 was actually the book of Jude rather than 1 Peter.

(3) Others have noted that 2 Peter's use of Jude parallels 1 Peter's use of the Paul's writings.

e) I think that the better explanation on who borrowed from whom is that Jude borrowed from Peter.

(1) Look for example, at 2 Peter 3:3 and Jude 17-18. Jude quotes 2 Peter and specifically says that it came from the apostles.

(2) Also, Jude tends to use the present tense in his description of false teachers, while 2 Peter uses the future tense. 2 Peter seems to be offering a prediction, while Jude is noting its fulfillment.

f) But if instead Jude came first (as most modern critics believe) then isn't it striking that 2 Peter is based on Jude rather than on 1 Peter!

(1) It is incredible to think that a forger who wanted everyone to believe that he was Peter would ignore the one book that all believed to be from Peter and instead base his forgery on a book that no one believed to be from Peter!

4. Let's consider a few final observations supporting authenticity:

a) There are a number of verbal similarities between 2 Peter and Peter's speeches in Acts. In fact, the similarity is greater than that between 1 Peter and Acts, which would support the theory that Peter used a secretary in writing the first letter but wrote the second letter himself.

b) Also, how could such a Jewish-Christian document have been produced in the 2nd century? Virtually all of the documents of that period are Christian documents produced

by Gentiles or Jewish documents produced by Jews. 2 Peter, if produced *after* Peter's death, would virtually stand alone in this regard.

c) But one final reason is in my mind the strongest. We do not have the Bible by accident. Other than the general truths we can discern about God from His creation, all that we know about God and about Jesus is from this book. We have been saved by obedience to the gospel, but apart from this book we would know absolutely nothing about that gospel.

(1) The formation, preservation, and faithful transmission of the word of God are fundamental to God's plan to bless the world through his son Jesus Christ, the word made flesh. How can we be certain that we have the authentic and complete word of God? Because we can trust the providence of God. I am convinced that God has and continues to watch over his word in this world.

(2) Isaiah 40:8 "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever."

(3) Matthew 24:35 "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

(4) What a wonderful promise from God! We should thank God every day that we have the word of God.

(5) But we also have a very sad verse: Amos 8:11 Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.

(6) It has been correctly noted that, as scarce as truth is, the supply has always exceeded the demand.

II. When was 2 Peter written?

A. The date of 2 Peter depends on the authorship of 2 Peter.

B. If, as I hope we have now concluded, Peter is the author, then the book was likely penned sometime between AD 60 and 68. We know it was written shortly before Peter's death, and many place his death in AD 65.

III. Why was 2 Peter written?

A. The focus of 1 Peter was the impending persecution facing the early church. The focus of 2 Peter was an even more dangerous problem facing the early church – the problem of false teaching.

B. What was the false teaching that was involved here?

1. The only clear reference to doctrinal error comes in 2 Peter 3:3-4 where Peter discusses those who were questioning whether Jesus would ever return to judge the world.

2. The primary focus is not on what these people were teaching, but on how they were living. As one commentator noted, these false teachers were also false behaviorists. Specifically, they were libertines.

a) Jude 4 describes them as people who change the grace of God into a license for immorality.

b) They no doubt had the attitude of Voltaire, who excused his own sin by saying “God will forgive; that’s his business.”

c) They likely used Paul’s writings in defense of their licentiousness, which would explain Peter’s reference to Paul’s writings as well as Paul’s reference in Romans to those who were using the grace of God as an excuse to continue living in sin.

3. Some believe that Peter and Jude were both battling an early form of Gnosticism. Gnostics did not believe that the spiritual and material worlds could interact. They denied that Jesus was both God and man. They did not think that what a man does in the body can affect his spirit, and so they became libertines.

a) But many commentators point out that Gnosticism was really a 2nd century problem, and they thus conclude that 2 Peter was a 2nd century book.

b) What these commentators fail to understand is that false teaching and departures from the faith do not just happen overnight. Gnosticism no doubt started in the first century and then exploded in the second century. Paul and John, for example, also dealt with early forms of Gnosticism.

c) We would do well to heed this point ourselves. There is no such thing as a minor departure from the word of God. Once you get on a road heading away from the word of God,

you may not know exactly where that road is heading, but you know for certain it is heading away from God! Shouldn't that be enough for us to make certain we don't get on that road in the first place?

C. We have considered who wrote 2 Peter, when it was written, and why it was written. In our introduction to 1 Peter we briefly considered the life of Peter, but recent events that have occurred since that first lesson warrant a return to that topic.

IV. Was Peter the first pope?

A. The Catholic Papacy is based on the premise that Peter was the first pope, and that he was followed by a long line of successors leading up to the current pope, who was elected into office last week. The underlying premise that Peter was pope, however, is wrong – and thus that long line of popes is based on a falsehood.

B. The *Catholic Dictionary* declares that Peter was “the first pope and bishop of Rome, prince of the Apostles, vicar of Jesus Christ, and human foundation of the Church.” Other descriptions of the popes by Catholic authors are even more grandiose:

1. “Our Lord God the pope; another God upon earth, king of kings, and lord of lords. The same is the dominion of God and the pope. ... The power of the pope is greater than all created power, and extends itself to things celestial, terrestrial, and infernal.”

2. “In matters of jurisdiction [the pope] enjoys supreme, universal and immediate jurisdiction over the whole Church and every member of it. This supremacy is not given by the cardinals who elect him, but immediately by God. The Pope is the Church's supreme and infallible teacher, its supreme legislator, and its supreme judge.”

3. The rest of the world (along with the fawning press) may mourn the old pope and praise the new pope, but to Christians these descriptions of the pope as “another God upon earth” are blasphemous and obscene. I am reminded of two verses:

a) Luke 6:26 Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets.

b) Luke 16:15 And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.

C. There is much we could say here about the evils of the Papacy, but we will limit our discussion to one simple question – was Peter the first pope? Let's consider the evidence.

1. Roman Catholics consider the state of celibacy (at least in theory if not in practice!) to be a holier status than the state of matrimony, and hence the pope cannot be married. Peter, however, was married. Jesus healed his mother-in-law in Matthew 8:14, Paul mentioned Peter's wife in 1 Corinthians 9:5. Also, 1 Peter 5:1 tells us that Peter was an elder, which from 1 Timothy 3:2 means he must have been married and had children. (The Bible seems to go out of its way to let us know that Peter was married!)

2. Those who have watched TV this past week have seen people bow down to the pope as he extends his hand for their kisses and adoration. In Acts 10:26, when Cornelius fell down before Peter, the apostle rebuked him by saying "Stand up! I myself also am a man." When was the last time you heard a pope say that?

3. Was Peter the "prince of the apostles"? In Galatians 2, when Peter played the hypocrite, Paul rebuked him to his face. There may have been some who were classifying the apostles by their importance, but Paul was not one of them – "For I suppose I was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles." (2 Corinthians 11:5)

4. The Catholics say that Peter ruled from Rome. There is a great deal in the New Testament about Peter, but not one firm indication that he was ever in Rome.

a) Tradition tells us that Peter died in Rome, which was certainly the case for Paul. Also, the reference to "Babylon" in 1 Peter may be a reference to Rome. (See the related discussion in our introduction to 1 Peter.)

b) But Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome and greeted more than 20 people in the final chapter, and he never mentioned Peter, who according to the Catholics was then occupying the papal throne in that city. Paul spent two years in Rome, but Acts 28 never mentions any association he had there with Peter. And yet when Paul made a 15 day trip to Jerusalem, we are told in Galatians 1:18 that he met with Peter while there. If Peter were really ruling the church from Rome doesn't it seem likely there would be a mention of it somewhere in the Bible? The modern popes certainly don't suffer from such a lack of publicity!

5. About 20 years after the establishment of the church, a controversy arose over circumcision. A council was convened in Jerusalem to discuss the matter. Wouldn't one expect Peter to preside at the meeting if he were really "the first pope and bishop of Rome, prince of the Apostles, vicar of Jesus Christ, and human foundation of the Church"? He did not. James was the leading figure; Peter was merely a testifying witness. (Acts 15)

6. In 1 and 2 Peter, Peter calls himself simply an apostle or servant of Christ. He used the same terminology that Paul used. He never once refers to himself with any august title.

7. As for the church's "human foundation", Peter said that Jesus is the chief corner stone. (1 Peter 2:6-7) Paul tell us in Ephesians 2:20 that the church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles [plural!] and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone." No mention is made of Peter alone being the human foundation of the church.

8. Peter referred to himself in 1 Peter 5:1 as a "fellow elder." No mention is made of being the "head of the church on earth."

9. And in that very context Peter forbids any elder from "lording it" over the church. (1 Peter 5:3) That would seem a bit hypocritical of Peter if he considered himself to be the supreme ruler.

10. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus told Peter that he was just a pebble, but there was rock on which Jesus would build his church – the confession in verse 16 that Jesus was the Christ. Peter was given the key to the kingdom of heaven, which he used when he opened the door in Acts 2 by preaching the first gospel sermon.

D. Was Peter the first pope? Absolutely not. Catholicism itself did not exist during the lifetime of Peter. It came about through departures from the word of God that occurred long after Peter's death. At first I am sure those departures seemed quite minor, but look where they ended up! If nothing else, doesn't the spectacle we all witnessed on TV this week tell us that no departure from God's word is minor? If you want to know where you are heading, then look at the road you are on. If that road is departing from the word of God, no matter how minor, then you are heading away from God, and you shouldn't be surprised when you look up one day and find yourself far, far away.