

PETER, SECOND LETTER OF

One of the seven “catholic” or “general” epistles. On the basis of [3:1](#) (“this is ... the second letter I am writing to you”) it is assumed that the same audience is intended as in 1 Peter, although no such specific reference occurs. The situation, style, and content indicate that both the writer and the intended readers lived in pluralistic Hellenistic environments.

Literary Structure

2 Peter may be outlined as follows:

1:1–15	<i>Introduction</i>
1:1–2	Greeting
1:3–9	Core of Peter’s definitive teaching
1:10–11	Admonition to make “calling and election sure”
1:12–15	Reminder: Peter’s testament
1:16–3:13	<i>Body</i>
1:16–21	Authentication of traditional Christian teaching
2:1–22	Denunciation of the “false teachers”
3:1–13	Eschatological certainty and Christian ethics
3:14–18	<i>Conclusion</i>

2 Peter evidences two literary genres: the letter and the testament. In [3:1](#) the writer refers to the document as a letter. Its opening ([1:1–2](#)) conforms to customary Jewish and early Christian letter openings. The introduction, stating the theme ([1:3–11](#)), followed by the statement of the occasion for the letter (vv. [12–15](#)), is typical. The letter was sent to specific addressees, i.e., the recipients of the letter of 1 Peter ([3:1](#)). So in spite of the general address ([1:1](#)), it is not a “catholic” letter addressed to all Christians, but an occasional letter aimed at a specific problem.

2 Peter is also a testament, or farewell speech. This genre, common in the intertestamental period, is characterized by two features: ethical admonitions and revelations of the future (cf. [Acts 20:17–34](#); 2 Timothy; also Acts of Peter, Acts of John, Acts of Thomas). [2 Pet. 1:3–11](#) is a homily which follows a pattern found, e.g., in the farewell speeches of Ezra ([2 Esdr. 14:28–36](#)). [2 Pet. 1:12–15](#) is replete with language typical of farewell addresses, and specifically mentions Peter’s knowledge of his approaching death. [2 Pet. 2:1–3a](#); [3:1–4](#) predict the arrival of false teachers.

Literary Relationships

It is commonly supposed that 2 Peter is a revision of Jude. Unlike Jude, 2 Peter contains only a few OT allusions, usually to the [LXX](#), and no OT citations or references to Assumption of Moses and 1 Enoch, the latter a very popular book in ‡ 2nd-century Christianity but used in ‡ the 1st century in Palestinian Jewish circles. Since Jude’s midrash is based on traditional material with which the readers were already familiar ([Jude 5](#)), 2 Peter may also use a similar tradition. Jude’s careful

midrashic structure is absent from 2 Peter. Contrary to common assumptions, the two letters derive from different situations, oppose different opponents, and therefore make appropriate use of and adjustments to whatever material they may have in common.

The author of 2 Peter knew a collection of Pauline letters and regarded them as “scriptures,” authoritative alongside the OT (3:15–16). However, there is little, if any, sign of Pauline influence in 2 Peter, even though the author states that Paul dealt with his subject matter. Although 2 Peter contains four allusions to gospel traditions (1:14; 1:16–18; 2:20; 3:10), it is impossible to tell whether it is dependent upon any of the four canonical Gospels. The account of the Transfiguration (1:16–18) is rather primitive and not at all like the strongly hellenized 2nd-century accounts.

The difference in vocabulary and style between 1 and 2 Peter is significant. Both letters are relatively brief and are directed to quite different situations. Unlike the Pauline letters, common terminology in 1 and 2 Peter is negligible and common themes are mostly those ideas common throughout early Christianity. While the author of 2 Peter knew 1 Peter, he did not follow the common 2nd-century pseudepigraphic practice of echoing writings attributed to their pseudonyms.

2 Peter is quite unlike other NT documents, and seems to represent a Christian situation and style of discourse not otherwise found in the NT. However, there are many parallels in ideas and terminology with 1–2 Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas, all claiming dates in the last decade of the 1st century. It is possible that 2 Peter shares with these works a common indebtedness to some tradition of Roman Christianity.

The Opponents

2 Peter is a polemical document intended to counter the influence of certain teachers who were denouncing early Christian eschatological expectations as a mere apostolic invention (1:16a; 2:3b; 3:4, 9a). As this skepticism lent itself to ignoring moral restraint, they laughed at warnings of a coming judgment, as well as at the supposed power of Satan and his angels (2:10). Freedom for them meant lack of restraint regarding sexuality, drunkenness, and sensual excess (2:2, 10, 13–14, 18).

Nowhere does 2 Peter mention any claims to spirituality, prophetic revelations, or perversion of grace as addressed in Jude’s epistle. Unlike the “ungodly intruders” in Jude, who are characterized by christological neglect and an antinomian understanding of grace, the “false teachers” in 2 Peter teach ethical libertinism rooted in eschatological skepticism. The only real resemblance between the opponents in the two epistles is their ethical libertinism.

The opponents here are not Gnostics. No evidence links them with cosmic dualism, nor does the delay of the Parousia figure in gnostic argument against traditional Christian eschatology. “Myths” in 1:16 does not refer to gnostic myths, but the opponents’ charge against the apostles. “Knowledge” here has no polemical overtones. Only with regard to eschatological disillusionment could the opponents in 2 Peter be considered primitive precursors of Gnosticism or even “incipient Gnostics.”

The most plausible background for the “false teachers” is the pagan environment with which they have compromised. Jerome H. Neyrey has shown the commonality between the eschatological

debate in 2 Peter and pagan Hellenistic controversy over the views of the Epicureans on eschatology. The sexual immorality of the opponents is rooted in accommodation to pagan society. If the “false teachers” could rid Christianity of its eschatology and ethical standards, they could be done with elements embarrassing in their culture. To what extent they held other traditional Christian views is not known. A basically negative theological construct could have appeared impressive (2:18).

Theological Character

2 Peter has been called the classic example of “early Catholicism,” demonstrating decreasing emphasis on the eschatological hope, increasing institutionalization in the Church, and crystallization of the faith into set forms. Certainly the author does not abandon the expectation of the Parousia common to early Christianity (1:19; 3:14), but 2 Peter makes no reference to ecclesiastical officeholders. While the author refers to Christian knowledge, there is nothing approaching formalized creedal orthodoxy. 2 Peter’s response to the opponents is not the “early Catholic” response of insistence upon institutional authority and creedal orthodoxy, but an appeal to return to the eschatological perspective common to early Christianity. Seeking to promote the ancient apostolic message in a postapostolic situation, the writer combines his own background in Hellenistic Judaism with a mixture of apocalypticism characteristic of the earlier Church (cf. 1-2 Clement, Hermas).

Date

2 Peter has been variously dated from A.D. 60–160. Peter’s death occurred ca. 66–67. 2 Peter knows the Pauline letters, which date from the mid-1st century but were collected somewhat later. The Apocalypse of Peter, dating from the first half of the 2nd century, knows 2 Peter. The lack of reference to 1 Enoch indicates a 1st-century date. Also, the absence of “early Catholic” stress on institutional officeholders may suggest an earlier date. The opponents are certainly not 2nd-century Gnostics. 2 Pet. 3:4 may reflect that the first generation of Christians, that of the apostles, are dead. The scoffers’ objection in 3:4 is plausible in the period 75–90, marked by great disillusionment regarding the Parousia. There is certainly no basis for viewing 2 Peter as the latest composition in the NT.

Authorship and Pseudonymity

Peter is portrayed as an eyewitness and authenticator of the historical Jesus (1:16–19) who had the authority to interpret Scripture and prophecy (vv. 20–21) and to correct false interpretations (3:15–16). While Peter could have been martyred in Rome as early as 65, it is more likely that he was imprisoned there shortly after the outbreak of the Jewish War in 66 and killed in 67. If 2 Peter was written by Peter, the changes brought about by the war and his own impending death could account for the differences in content and tone between 1 and 2 Peter. The letter, written to specific churches (3:15), could have originated in Rome. 2 Pet. 3:1 suggests that the churches addressed are those which 1 Peter addressed from Rome (1 Pet. 5:13).

However, certain factors militate against Petrine authorship. The author of 2 Peter was likely

Jewish, but a strongly hellenized Jew. 2 Peter evidences the highest proportion of *hapax legomena* in the NT: 57 words do not occur elsewhere in the NT, and 32 of these do not occur in the LXX either. The vocabulary reflects that of other Hellenistic Jewish writers of the period (e.g., Philo and Josephus) and the Apostolic Fathers. This suggests that the writer is widely read, fond of literary and poetic terms, and aims at creating a decidedly literary effect not unlike contemporary Greek rhetoric.

It is generally held that the document is pseudonymous, employing the testament genre to address current issues as a prediction of a venerable figure of the past. This does not imply a fraudulent means of claiming apostolic authority, but faithfulness to the apostolic message.

Along with 1 Peter and a large body of noncanonical Petrine literature (including the Gospel of Peter, Preaching of Peter, Acts of Peter, Apocalypse of Peter), 2 Peter illustrates the importance attributed to the Apostle Peter in both orthodox and heterodox circles. Even so, no NT document is so weakly attested among the church fathers or was so slowly accepted into the NT canon as 2 Peter.

Bibliography. R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*. WBC 50 (Waco, 1983); T. Fornberg, *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society: A Study of 2 Peter*. ConBNT 9 (Lund, 1977); B. M. Metzger, "Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha," *JBL* 91 (1972): 3–24; J. H. Neyrey, "The Form and Background of the Polemic in 2 Peter," *JBL* 99 (1980): 407–31.

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