

LESSON ONE

INTRODUCTION TO 1 PETER

1. Introduction.

1. Peter's first epistle has been called "the most condensed New Testament resumè of the Christian faith and of the conduct that it inspires."
2. Peter seeks to encourage and reassure Christians in Asia Minor in the face of persecution that was beginning to fall upon them.
 1. Peter speaks to us all when he tells of the present suffering and future glory.
 2. He encourages us by instructing us.
 1. Our deepest needs drive our deepest beliefs.
 2. What hope do we have?
 1. Peter proclaims Jesus as our sure hope now and forever.
 2. Throughout his letter he grounds our hope in the reality of what God has done and will yet do for us through Christ.
 3. Peter was a witness, not just to what Jesus did and said while he was in his fishing-boat or in his house, but to the meaning of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension.
 4. Peter's testimony about the life of Jesus is reflected in Mark's gospel.
 5. In this letter he shows us what that story means for us as Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

2. Who wrote the letter?

1. The letter identifies the author as Peter.
 1. Deniers of Peter's authorship assert that the early church would regard the use of Peter as a pseudonym as a harmless literary device.
 1. That this is not so is demonstrated by the fact that a number of works claiming to have been written by Peter were rejected as not apostolic.
 2. Since the apostles, especially Peter, were invested with the authority for the establishment of the church, a false claim to that authority would not have been taken lightly.
 3. That apostolic authority was taken seriously cannot be doubted given Paul's vigorous defense of his apostleship.
2. The attestation of the letter in other writings is early and strong.
 1. The earliest is the reference in 2 Peter 3:1.
 2. Clement of Rome (before the end of the first century) quotes from the letter, although he does not identify his quotation.
 3. Irenaeus, in the second century, expressly attributes his quotations to

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the epistle.

3. There are four basic arguments made by those who deny Peter's authorship.
 1. The Greek style is too polished for a Galilean fisherman (a reference in Papias to John Mark as Peter's "interpreter" is taken to mean that Peter needed an interpreter because he was not fluent in Greek).
 2. The persecutions alluded to in the letter did not occur until after Peter's death.
 3. The letter is said to be too much like Paul's writings to have come from Peter.
 4. Many who recognize significant differences from Paul's writings maintain, nevertheless, that 1 Peter contains traditional teaching materials from the early church and is not the kind of letter than one of the first disciples of Jesus would have written.
4. These arguments fail.
 1. The last objection is met by recognizing the purpose of the letter.
 1. Peter's eye witness to the words and deeds of Jesus had already been given.
 2. John Mark's "interpreting" of Peter's message involved his recording of Peter's witness in the Gospel of Mark.
 3. In the epistle, knowledge of the story of Jesus is assumed, and Peter is concerned to instruct the church in the apostolic interpretation of the gospel.
 4. This apostolic teaching is also found in Paul's letters.
 2. The objection that this letter is too much like Paul's letters is met by recognizing that Paul, as well as Peter, conformed his teaching to the apostolic "pattern of sound teaching" 2 Tim. 1:13.
 1. Additionally, Peter's teaching has distinctive features.
 2. For example, Paul does not employ the "servant of the Lord" description of Christ's work as Peter does.
 3. In fact, it would be surprising if a letter written near the end of Peter's life did not have similarities in thought, or even in wording, to some of Paul's letters.
 1. If the historical traditions reported by Eusebius and Tertullian are true, then Peter, near the end of his life, was teaching with Paul in Rome.
 2. Moreover, the Silvanus whom Peter names as the messenger

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carrying his letter, 5:12, was Paul's travelling companion and assistant (also known by the name "Silas") for many years.

4. Affinities between the writings of Paul and Peter weigh more heavily in favor of Peter's authorship than against it.
3. The objection based on persecution assumes that Nero's persecution is referenced.
 1. It is true that the traditional date for Peter's death under Nero precedes the major period of Roman persecution, persecution that was government sponsored and that spread throughout the entire Roman empire.
 2. However, 1 Peter does not reflect a situation of official and general oppression; instead, it is a time of local harassment and sporadic persecution, a time in which Christians are warned to prepare for greater suffering for Christ's sake in the future.
 3. Peter's specific directive regarding the government is to be submissive to it, 1 Pet. 2:13-14, and to honor the king, 1 Pet. 2:17.
 4. He does not specify one type of suffering, but urges his readers to prepare to suffer grief in various trials. 1:6.
 5. All other statements about suffering in 1 Peter can be understood as general statements addressed to Christians where there was a likelihood of localized persecution.
 6. This was not unusual for the first century in Asia Minor where, from the first spread of the gospel, there had been hostility and even violent opposition in many places. (More will be said about this when we reach 4:12).
 7. Thus the letter cannot be said to reflect a time after Peter's death; it can and does fit well with the situation that existed in Peter's lifetime.
4. Even if Peter was not illiterate and did not need a translator, how much Greek could he have known?
 1. When Alexander the Great conquered Palestine in 332 B.C., a process of "Hellenization" (the imposing of the Greek language and culture on non-Greek people) began, and it continued for the next four centuries.
 1. Thus by the time Peter wrote, there had been nearly four hundred years of Greek influence in Palestine.
 2. There were many Greek cities, especially in and around Galilee.

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1. Joppa on the coast had been a center of Greek influence for many years.
2. The ten Greek cities called the "Decapolis" were within easy travelling distance.
3. In addition, such newer cities as Caesarea (the administrative capital of Judea), Antipatris, Sebaste (ancient Samaria), Neapolis, Tiberias (on the Sea of Galilee), and Caesarea Philippi, were more or less thoroughly Greek cities, peopled mainly by non-Jews and using Greek as their everyday language.
3. Ancient evidence of the use of Greek in Palestine is abundant.
 1. Hundreds of Jewish ossuaries (stone "coffins" in which the bones of dead people were placed) have been uncovered in an around Jerusalem, all dating from the first century A.D. or earlier.
 2. Of the ossuaries discovered in Jerusalem, 97 are in Hebrew or Aramaic, 64 are in Greek, and 14 are bilingual.
 3. This is significant because it is likely that surviving relatives writing the name of the deceased person on a stone coffin would write in the language in which the person was usually addressed.
 4. A large plaque from the entrance to the temple in Jerusalem, unearthed in the 19th century, and dating from before 70 A.D., warned all non-Jews not to enter beyond that point; it was written only in Greek.
 1. While it is true that this does not prove absolutely that Jews spoke Greek, it does demonstrate that the Jews believed that all Gentiles in Jerusalem could read and understand Greek.
 2. Further, it shows that if the Jews in Jerusalem spoke with the Gentiles in Jerusalem in everyday life, they spoke frequently in Greek.
 5. Even more remarkable is a Greek inscription from the wall of a synagogue that was found on a hill south of the temple area in Jerusalem.
 1. It was on a memorial plaque that commemorated the work of the ruler of the synagogue who was both a priest (presumably in the Jerusalem temple) and the son and

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grandson of synagogue rulers.

2. That a memorial plaque on the wall of a Jewish synagogue in Jerusalem could be written in Greek shows how thoroughly the use of the Greek language had penetrated even to the center of Judaism in Palestine at or before the time of the New Testament.
 6. Public decrees and proclamations were also written in Greek and posted where they could be seen by all.
 7. A passage in the Babylon Talmud seems to indicate extensive knowledge of Greek in Palestine by asserting that, of the 1,000 students in the School of Gamaliel, 500 studied the Torah and 500 studied Greek wisdom.
 8. Josephus declared that in his day even slaves could acquire fluency in Greek and that it was common to ordinary freemen.
2. Clearly, it seems fair to conclude that the Greek language was well known and commonly used in Palestine in the first century.
 1. This was true even in Jerusalem, although Aramaic was still the most commonly used language there.
 2. It was even more the case in Galilee where Peter grew up surrounded by Greek cities and the influence of residents and visitors who spoke only Greek.
 3. All this demonstrates that it would not have been unusual for Peter to have used Greek regularly for over thirty years in the Jerusalem church (as well as earlier in even more fully Greek-speaking Galilee) and to have become very familiar with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (as the Old Testament quotations in 1 Peter indicate).
 4. Could someone like Peter who lacked a formal education have learned to write Greek well enough to write 1 Peter?
 1. If lack of education was not an insuperable obstacle to John Bunyan, the Bedford tinker who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, can we assume that Peter could not have written the books that bear his name?
 2. There are many bi-lingual areas of the world such as Wales (Welsh and English) French speaking areas of Canada, and Texas (Spanish and English) to name a few.
 3. It is also possible, as the example of Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)

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demonstrates, to become a highly accomplished writer in a second or even a third language.

1. Conrad's first language was Polish.
 2. As a young man he learned French.
 3. He began to learn English only at the age of twenty-one when he signed on as a seaman on a British ship, yet his novel, *Lord Jim*, is acknowledged as an English literary classic.
 4. Conrad once said that he had never in his life opened an English grammar.
 5. Finally, we should never forget that when the religious leaders of Peter's day were astonished at his ability, they took note that he had been with Jesus. Acts 4:13.
3. To whom was the letter written?
1. Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia are the provinces where the addressees of this letter lived.
 2. If the terms are used to name Roman provinces, the area covers the whole of Asia Minor north of the Taurus mountain chain that skirts the southern coast. Most of modern Turkey would be included.
 3. It is possible, however, that the terms describe regions rather than official provinces.
 1. If so, the area is smaller, since both Galatia and Asia, thought of as regions, were more restricted.
 2. The possible significance of the smaller area would be that some of the regions of Paul's intensive missionary work would not be included (*i.e.*, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe).
 3. Paul was forbidden to go into Bythynia; was that region reserved for others?
 4. The church historian Eusebius suggests that Peter himself may have had a part in evangelizing the areas he names.
 4. Whether Peter wrote to Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians has been a subject of great debate.
 1. If Peter were writing to Jewish converts they must certainly have been Jews in name only.
 2. Peter speaks of the "empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers." 1:18.
 3. He describes that wicked lifestyle in a manner consistent with Gentile lifestyle, but not characteristic of Jewish lifestyle. 4:3.

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4. Even if Peter wrote to Jews who had lived in this manner, it would hardly be true that that lifestyle had been handed down to them by their fathers.
5. Moreover, pagan neighbors would hardly be surprised if such Jews returned to the normal moral lifestyle of Judaism.
6. It seems clear that the recipients of Peter's epistle were predominantly Gentile.
 1. Peter's use of the Old Testament is not to the contrary.
 2. Paul's letters to predominantly Gentile congregations also made extensive use of the Old Testament.
4. Where And When Was It Written?
 1. The answer to this question depends on whether "Babylon," identified as the place of writing in 5:13, is used figuratively (Rome) or literally (ancient Babylon).
 1. There is no hint in tradition that Peter ever visited in the distant east.
 1. By the first century, Babylon in Mesopotamia, the capital of the ancient Babylonian Empire, was a small and obscure place.
 2. Some have even said that it had ceased to exist.
 3. Perhaps Strabo who died in 19 A.D. reconciled these positions when he described Babylon as so deserted that one would not hesitate to say that it was a great desert.
 2. There is no evidence that a church existed there at the time of Peter's writing.
 3. While it is true that tradition is full of silences, the question relates not only to Peter, but also to Silvanus and Mark. 5:12-13.
 1. All three would have had to have been in Babylon.
 2. To place all of these persons in Babylon is to ask too much.
 4. "Babylon" is used figuratively elsewhere in Scripture.
 1. Rome - Rev. 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, and see 17:9 as an identification of the "seven hills of Rome."
 2. Just as in the Old Testament Babylon was the center of worldly power and opposition to God's people, so in the time of the New Testament Rome was the earthly center of a world-wide system of government and life that was set in opposition to the gospel.
 5. There is historical evidence that Peter was in Rome at the end of his life.
 1. Tertullian wrote in 203 A.D, "Since, moreover, you are close upon Italy, you have Rome, from which there comes even into our own hands the very authority of apostles themselves. How happy is its

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church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! where Peter endures a passion like his lord's! where Paul wins his crown in a death like John's!"

2. Eusebius supplements Tertullian, writing in 325 A.D. of Peter and Paul, "And that they both were martyred at the same time Dionysius, Bishop of Corinth [c. A.D. 170], affirms in this passage of his correspondence with the Romans: 'By so great an admonition you bound together the foundations of the Romans and Corinthians by Peter and Paul, for both of them taught in Italy in the same place and were martyred at the same time.
 3. Eusebius continues his history of Peter and Paul, "Peter seems to have preached to the Jews of the Dispersion in Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia, Cappadocia and Asia, and at the end he came to Rome and was crucified head downwards, for so he had demanded to suffer. What need be said of Paul, who fulfilled the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyria and afterward was martyred in Rome under Nero? This is stated exactly by Origen [died c. A.D. 254] in the third volume of his commentary on Genesis.
 4. Finally, Eusebius explicitly states that Peter wrote his first letter in Rome, "The bishop of Hierapolis, named Papias [c. 60-130 A.D.] . . . says that Peter mentions Mark in his first Epistle, and that he composed this in Rome itself, which they say that he himself indicates, referring to the city metaphorically as Babylon, in the words, 'the elect one in Babylon greets you, and Marcus my son.' "
 5. These testimonies, taken together, indicate that Peter and Paul both died in the persecution under Nero. This persecution lasted from the time just after the great fire in Rome in 64 A.D. until Nero's death by suicide on June 9, 68 A.D.
 6. Thus, we may conclude that the name "Babylon" in the letter and the external historical evidence that Peter was in Rome with Paul near the end of his life combine to indicate that 1 Peter was written from Rome.
2. When was it written?
1. Since Peter's letter mentions Mark but not Paul, it seems unlikely that Paul was in Rome at the time that it was written.
 2. By the same token, Paul does not mention Peter in his letters, even when he seems to be naming the men of the circumcision who remained his faithful comrades. Phil. 2:20-21; Col. 4:10-11.
 3. According to tradition, Peter was at Rome only at the end of his life.

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4. It would seem, therefore, that Peter wrote from Rome after Paul had left, released from his first imprisonment in 62 A.D.
5. It seems unlikely that Nero's fierce assault on the Christians in Rome could have begun.
 1. One would suppose that Peter would have made some reference to it in describing the loyalty due to the king. 2:13-17.
 2. The date 63 A.D., after Paul's departure and before Nero's persecution, has a high degree of probability. Some time early in 64 A.D before Nero's persecution began appears to be the latest possible date.
5. What Is The Purpose of the Letter?
 1. Since many of Peter's exhortations concern faith and obedience, the purpose of the letter appears to be to encourage the readers to grow in their trust in God and their obedience to him throughout their lives, but especially when they suffer.
 2. Peter accomplishes this purpose by pointing to what God has done for them in Christ, and then applying that to the readers' lives.
 3. These themes will be seen in much detail throughout the exposition of the text, but it is sufficient here to note one verse which, perhaps better than all others in the letter, summarizes these concerns: Wherefore let them also that suffer according to the will of God commit their souls in well-doing unto a faithful Creator. 4:19.
 4. Here are found the themes of suffering (them also that suffer) and trust in God (the suffering is according to the will of God and should result in continual entrusting of the readers' souls [lives] to a faithful Creator); moreover, such trust in God should also be accompanied by obedience, for they should continue to do right.
 5. One commentator wrote: This excellent Epistle (full of evangelical doctrine and apostolical authority) is a brief, and yet very clear summary both of the consolations and instructions needful for the encouragement and direction of a Christian in his journey to Heaven, elevating his thoughts and desires to that happiness, and strengthening him against all opposition in the way, both that of corruption within, and temptations and afflictions from without. The heads of doctrine contained in it are many, but the main that are most insisted on, are these three, *faith, obedience, and patience*; to establish them in believing, to direct them in doing and to comfort them in suffering.