

The Second Letter of St. Peter

Although the second letter claims authorship from St. Peter (1:1, 14) and refers to itself as being a second letter (3:1) its content elsewhere indicates strongly that it could not have been written until well after St. Peter's death: it refers to a collection of St. Paul's letters (3:16) which did not come into existence as a corpus until the beginning of the first century, it refers to 'your apostles' (3:2) as if the author was not actually an apostle, it is not written to a particular community, and it virtually reproduces the content of the Letter of St. Jude (ch.2), but without the direct references made there to non-canonical texts.

Content and Purpose of 2 Peter

The Letter is concerned both with **defending God's justice** against false teachers (2:1), to show that God will punish sinners and reward the just, in the same way he rescued Lot (2:7 and 9) and punished Sodom (2:6 and 9), and to explain the **apparent delay of the Parousia**, or return of Jesus in glory "with the Lord a day is like a thousand years .." In making this defence the author uses the core of St. Jude's letter but adapts it to the specific problems he is addressing.

The Letter of St. Jude

Jude makes no claim to apostleship, rather he is the brother of James (v.1), who presumably is the Lord's 'brother' who became head of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15). The letter is a general letter, written after the apostles are dead (v.17) and with the essentials of the faith firmly established (v.3).

Content and Purpose of Jude's Letter

Jude's letter is directed against false teachers who have infiltrated the Christian community (v.4): they seem to have taught that it does not matter what people do with their bodies: "with the same sexual immorality pursued unnatural lusts .. they defile their bodies". But Jude uses no systematic arguments against them, rather he just issues threats against them, using texts from two non-canonical books, the Assumption of Moses (the Archangel Michael in dispute with Satan over the body of Moses) and the Book of Enoch (re: Judgement).

The Non-Pauline Letters of the New Testament

2. The Two Letters of Peter The Letter of Jude



Questions

1. Why would a letter associated with St. Peter be written to Churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey)?
2. What does the second letter of St. Peter, and that of Jude, tell us about the difficulties faced by the early Church?
3. Can you think of reasons why it is more likely that St. Peter's second letter incorporates the letter of Jude than the other way round?

For Reflection

Who are the Authors of these Letters?

It is important to realise that the names associated with these letters may not have been the actual authors. It was common practice in the ancient world to associate famous people with writings in order to give them authority (even where there was only a tenuous link between them and the contents of those writings). The acceptance of these Letters into the Canon of scripture is based on their content not their authorship.



The First Letter of St. Peter

Although both of the Letters ascribed to Peter contain an introductory claim to that effect, only the first letter has any testimony to that effect from the early Church. However, there are sound arguments against the first letter being authentic to St. Peter himself:

1. the style of the Greek used in the first letter could not have been written by an uneducated Galilean
2. it is notable that it contains many expressions that are common to St. Paul's letters (1:14=Rm.12:2; 3:9=Rm.12:17, 4:10f=Rm.12:6f)
3. Why would St. Peter be writing a letter to Churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) which were under the sphere of influence of St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles?
4. Although the Emperor Nero instigated a persecution of Christians in Rome, there was no general persecution of Christians, which the letter implies (ch.3) was taking place, until the time of the Emperor Domitian at the end of the first century.

The first two arguments could be explained by the fact that the author used Silvanus (Silas), the companion of St. Paul, as a scribe for his thoughts (5:12). However, given the other two objections, it is more straightforward to accept that the letter was written by the Roman Church to support its fellow Churches during Domitian's persecution. This was well after the Jerusalem Church had been dispersed by the Roman destruction of the city in 70AD, and no doubt a process was taking place whereby leadership of the whole Church was now being assumed by the Christian community at the centre of the Roman world

a community associated with St. Peter. By giving St. Peter as its author, the Roman Church was stating that its authority for writing to other Churches was based on its apostolic connection to St. Peter himself.



Content and Purpose of 1 Peter

The letter is full of **baptismal allusions**: “new birth”, “you have purified yourself ..”, “like new-born babies, all your

longing should be for milk”, “it is the baptism corresponding to this water which saves you now”. As such, the letter stresses **the Church is a living spiritual house** (2:5) and a **liturgical community** “a chosen race, a royal priesthood .. to sing the praises of God” (2:9).

There are clear references not only to the everyday difficulties faced by Christians in a pagan world “you must bear all sorts of trial” and “you have to suffer for being upright”, but to a more **rigorous and systematic persecution** “the testing of fire that is taking place amongst you .. the time has come for the judgement to begin at the household of God”.



This persecution seems to be one officially sanctioned by the Emperor (Domitian?)

because of the reference to ‘Babylon’ (i.e. Rome) at the end of the letter. The letter urges those persecuted to **imitate the example of Christ** “because Christ suffered for you and left an example for you to follow in his footsteps”.

There is a strong case, therefore, for what was an original baptismal sermon (possible original to St. Peter) being adapted to provide support to the Churches in Asia Minor during a time of severe persecution. If this view is correct, then it may be asked why does the letter ask Christians to obey the Emperor and his Governors (2:13f)? This may be the author's way of making it clear to the Roman government that Christians are loyal citizens and not traitors to the Empire “by your good deeds you should silence the ignorant talk of fools”.

The letter is also famous for its reference to Jesus' descent after his death into Hades (the O.T. Sheol) (3:19) (incorrectly translated Hell).