

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EPISTLE OF PETER

by

Albert Barnes

Note: Author's introduction in *Notes Explanatory and Practical on the General Epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1860). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

The first epistle of Peter has never been doubted to be the production of the apostle of that name. While there were doubts respecting the genuineness of the second epistle (see Intro. to that epistle, §1), the unvarying testimony of history and the uniform belief of the church ascribe this epistle to him. Indeed, there is no ancient writing whatever of which there is more certainty in regard to the authorship.

The history of Peter is so fully detailed in the New Testament that it is not necessary to go into any extended statement of his biography in order to an exposition of his epistles. No particular light would be reflected on them from the details of his life; and in order, therefore, to their exposition, it is not necessary to have any farther information of him than what is contained in the New Testament itself. Those who may wish to obtain all the knowledge of his life which can now be had may find ample details in Lardner, vol. vi. pp. 203-254, ed. London, 1829; Koppe, Proleg.; and *Bacon's Lives of the Apostles*, pp. 43-286. There are some questions, however, which it is important to consider in order to an intelligent understanding of his epistles.

1. *The persons to whom the first Epistle was addressed*

This epistle purports to have been addressed "to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." All these were provinces of Asia Minor, and there is no difficulty, therefore, in regard to the *places* where those to whom the epistle was written resided. The only question is, who they were who are thus designated as 'strangers scattered abroad,' or *strangers of the dispersion* (*παρεπιδήμευς διασπορας*). Comp. Notes on ch. 1:1. In regard to this, various opinions have been held.

1. That they were native-born Jews, who had been converted to the Christian faith. Of this opinion were Eusebius, Jerome, Grotius, Beza, Mill, Cave, and others. The principal argument for this opinion is the appellation given to them, ch. 1:1, 'strangers scattered abroad,' and what is said in 2:9; 3:6, which it is supposed is language which would be applied only to those of Hebrew extraction.

2. A second opinion has been that the persons to whom it was sent were all of Gentile origin. Of this opinion were Procopius, Cassiodorus, and more recently Wetstein. This belief is founded chiefly on such passages as the following: 1:18; 2:10; 4:3, which are supposed to show that they who were thus addressed were formerly idolaters.

3. A third opinion has been that they were Gentiles by birth but had been Jewish proselytes, or 'Proselytes of the Gate,' and had then been converted to Christianity. This sentiment was defended by Michaelis chiefly on the ground that the phrase in ch. 1:1, 'strangers of the dispersion,' when followed by the name of a heathen country or people, in the genitive case, denotes the Jews who

were dispersed there, and yet that there is evidence in the epistle that they were not native-born Jews.

4. A fourth opinion has been that the persons referred to were not Jews in general but those of the ten tribes who had wandered from Babylon and the adjacent regions into Asia Minor. This opinion is mentioned by Michaelis as having been entertained by some persons, but no reasons are assigned for it.

5. A fifth opinion has been that the persons referred to were Christians converted from both Jews and Gentiles, with no particular reference to their extraction; that there were those among them who had been converted from the Jews and those who had been Gentiles, and that the apostle addresses them *as* Christians though employing language such as the Jews had been accustomed to when speaking of those of their own nation who were scattered abroad. This is the opinion of Lardner, Estius, Whitby, Wolfius, and Doddridge.

That this last opinion is the correct one seems to me to be clear from the epistle itself. Nothing can be plainer than that the apostle, while in the main he addresses Christians as such whether they had been Jews or heathen, yet occasionally makes such allusions and uses such language as to show that he had his eye at one time on some who had been Jews and again on some who had been pagans. This is clear, I think, from the following considerations:

1. The address of the epistle is general, not directed particularly either to the Jews or to the Gentiles. Thus in 5:14 he says, "Peace be with you all that are in Christ Jesus." From this it would seem that the epistle was addressed to *all* true Christians in the region designated in ch. 1:1. But no one can doubt that there were Christians there who had been Jews and also those who had been Gentiles. The same thing is apparent from the second epistle, for it is certain from 2 Pet. 3:2 that the second epistle was addressed to the same persons as the first. But the address in the second epistle is to Christians residing in Asia Minor without particular reference to their origin--thus in 1:1, "To them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." The same thing is apparent also from the address of the first epistle--"To the elect strangers scattered throughout Pontus," &c. That is, 'to the strangers of the dispersion who are chosen, or who are true Christians, scattered abroad.'

The term 'elect' is one which would apply to all who were Christians; and the phrase 'the strangers of the dispersion' is that which one who had been educated as a Hebrew would be likely to apply to those whom he regarded as the people of God dwelling out of Palestine. The Jews were accustomed to use this expression to denote their own people who were dispersed among the Gentiles, and nothing would be more natural than that one who had been educated as a Hebrew and then converted to Christianity, as Peter had been, should apply this phrase indiscriminately to Christians living out of Palestine. See the Notes on the passage. These considerations make it clear that in writing this epistle he had reference to Christians *as such*, and meant that *all* who were Christians in the parts of Asia Minor which he mentions (1:1) should regard the epistle as addressed to them. Yet,

2. There are some allusions in the epistle which look as if a part of them at least had been Jews before their conversion, or such as a Jew would better understand than a Gentile would. Indeed, nothing is more probable than that there were Jewish converts in that region. We know that there were many Jews in Asia Minor, and from the Acts of the Apostles it is morally certain that not a few of them had been converted to the Christian faith under the labours of Paul. Of the allusions of the kind referred to in the epistle, the following may be taken as specimens: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people" (2:9). This is such language as was commonly used by the Jews when addressing their own countrymen as the people of God, and would seem to imply that to some of those at least to whom the epistle was addressed it was

language which would be familiar. See also 3:6.

It should be said, however, that these passages are not *positive* proof that any among them were Hebrews. While it is true that it is such language as would be naturally employed in addressing those who were, and while it supposes an acquaintance among them with the Old Testament, it is also true that it is such language as one who had himself been educated as a Hebrew would not unnaturally employ when addressing any whom he regarded as the people of God.

3. The passages in the epistle which imply that many of those to whom it was addressed had been Gentiles or idolaters are still more clear. Such passages are the following: "As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to your former lusts in your ignorance" (1:14). "This," says Dr. Lardner, "might be very pertinently said to men converted from Gentilism to Christianity; but no such thing is ever said by the apostles concerning the Jewish people who had been favoured with the divine revelation, and had the knowledge of the true God." So in 2:9 Peter speaks of them as "having been called out of darkness into marvelous light." The word 'darkness' is one which would be naturally applied to those who had been heathens, but would not be likely to be applied to those who had had the knowledge of God as revealed in the Jewish Scriptures. So in 2:10 it is expressly said of them, "which in time past was not a people, but are now the people of God"--language which would not be applied to those who had been Jews.

So also 4:3, "For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revelings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries." Though the apostle here uses the word '*us*,' grouping himself with them, yet it cannot be supposed that he means to charge himself with these things. It is a mild and gentle way of speech, adopted not to give offence; and is such language as a minister of the gospel would now use, who felt that he was himself a sinner, in addressing a church made up of many individuals. Though it might be true that *he* had not been guilty of the particular offences which he specifies, yet in speaking in the name of the church he would use the term *we*, and use it honestly and correctly. It would be *true* that the church had been formerly guilty of these things; and this would be a much more mild, proper, and effective method of address than to say *you*. But the passages adduced here prove conclusively that some of those whom Peter addresses in the epistle had been formerly idolaters and had been addicted to the sins which idolaters are accustomed to commit.

These considerations make it clear that the epistle was addressed to those Christians in general who were scattered throughout the various provinces of Asia Minor which are specified in 1:1, whether they had been Jews or Gentiles. It is probable that the great body of them had been converted from the heathen, though there were doubtless Jewish converts intermingled with them; and Peter uses such language as would be natural for one who had been a Jew himself in addressing those whom he now regarded as the chosen of God.

2. *The time and place of writing the Epistle*

On this point also there has been no little diversity of opinion. The only designation of the *place* where it was written which occurs in the epistle is in 5:13: "The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, salutes you." From this it is clear that it was written at *Babylon*, but still there has been no little difference of opinion as to what place is meant here by Babylon. Some have supposed that it refers to the well known place of that name on the Euphrates; others to a Babylon situated in Lower Egypt; others to Jerusalem or Rome, represented as Babylon. The claims of each of these places it is proper to examine. The order in which this is done is not material.

1. The opinion that the 'Babylon' mentioned in the epistle refers to a place of that name in Egypt, not far from Cairo. This opinion was held by Pearson and LeClerc, and by most of the *Coptic* interpreters, who have endeavoured to vindicate the honour of their own country, Egypt, as a place

where one of the books of Scripture was composed. See Koppe, Proleg. 12. That there *was* such a place in Egypt there can be no doubt. It was a small town to the northeast of Cairo, where there was a strong castle in the time of Strabo (i. 17, p. 807) in which, under Tiberias, there were quartered three Roman legions designed to keep the Egyptians in order. But there is little reason to suppose that there were many Jews there or that a church was early collected there. The Jews would have been little likely to resort to a place which was merely a Roman garrison, nor would the apostles have been likely to go early to such a place to preach the gospel. Comp. Basnage, Ant. 36, num. xxvii. As Lardner well remarks, if Peter had written an epistle from Egypt, it would have been likely to have been from Alexandria.

Besides, there is not for the first four centuries any notice of a church at Babylon in Egypt, a fact which can hardly be accounted for if it had been supposed that one of the sacred books had been composed there (Lardner, vol. vi. 265). It may be added, also, that as there was another place of that name on the Euphrates, a place much better known and which would be naturally supposed to be the one referred to, it is probable that if the epistle had been composed at the Babylon in Egypt there would have been something said clearly to distinguish it. If the epistle was written at the Babylon on the Euphrates, so well known was that place that no one would be likely to understand that the Babylon in Egypt was the place referred to; on the other supposition, however, nothing would be more likely than that a mistake should occur.

2. Others have supposed that Jerusalem is intended, and that the name was given to it on account of its wickedness and because it resembled Babylon. This was the opinion of Capellus, Spanheim, Hardouin, and some others. But the objections to this are obvious

(a) There is no evidence that the name *Babylon* was ever given to Jerusalem, or so given to it as to make it commonly understood that that was the place intended when the term was employed. If not so, its use would be likely to lead those to whom the epistle was addressed into a mistake.

(b) There is every reason to suppose that an apostle in writing a letter, if he mentioned the place at all where it was written, would mention the *real* name. So Paul uniformly does.

(c) The name Babylon is not one which an apostle would be likely to give to Jerusalem; certainly not as the name by which it was to be familiarly known.

(d) If the epistle had been written there, there is no conceivable reason why the name of the place should not have been mentioned.

3. Others have supposed that *Rome* is intended by the name Babylon. This was the opinion of many of the Fathers, and also of Bede, Valesius, Grotius, Cave, Whitby, and Lardner. The principle reasons for this are, that such is the testimony of Papias, Eusebius and Jerome; and that at that time Babylon on the Euphrates was destroyed (see Lardner). But the objections to this opinion seem to me to be insuperable.

(a) There is no evidence that at that early period the name Babylon was given to Rome, nor were there any existing reasons why it should be. The name is generally supposed to have been applied to it by John in the book of Revelation (16:19; 17:5; 18:10,21), but this was probably long after this epistle was written and for reasons which did not exist in the time of Peter. There is no evidence that it was given familiarly to it in the time of Peter, or even at all until after his death. Certain it is that it was not given so familiarly to it that when the name *Babylon* was mentioned it would be generally understood that Rome was intended. But the only reason which Peter could have had for mentioning the name Babylon at all was to convey some definite and certain information to those to whom he wrote.

(b) As has been already observed, the apostles, when they sent an epistle to the churches and mentioned a place as the one where the epistle was written, were accustomed to mention the real place.

(c) It would be hardly consistent with the dignity of an apostle, or any grave writer, to make use of what would be regarded as a *nickname* when suggesting the name of the place where he then was.

(d) If Rome had been meant, it would have been hardly respectful to *the church* there which sent the salutation--"The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you"--to have given it this name. Peter mentions the church with respect and kindness; and yet it would have been scarcely regarded as kind to mention it as a 'church *in Babylon*' if he used the term Babylon, as he must have done on such a supposition, to denote a place of eminent depravity.

(e) The testimony of the Fathers on this subject does not demonstrate that Rome was the place intended. So far as appears from the extracts relied on by Lardner, they do not give this as *historical testimony* but as their own interpretation; and from anything that appears, we are as well qualified to interpret the word as they were.

(f) In regard to the objection that Babylon was at that time destroyed, it may be remarked that this is true so far as the original splendour of the city was concerned, but still there may have been a sufficient population there to have constituted a church. The destruction of Babylon was gradual. It had not become an utter desert in the time of the apostles. In the first century of the Christian era a part of it was inhabited, though the greater portion of its former site was a waste. See Notes on Isa. 13:19. Comp. Diod. Sic., 22. 27. All that time there is no improbability in supposing that a Christian church may have existed there.

It should be added here, however, that on the supposition that the word *Babylon* refers to Rome rests nearly all the evidence which the Roman Catholics can adduce that the apostle Peter was ever at Rome at all. There is nothing else in the New Testament that furnishes the slightest proof that he ever was there. The only passage on which Bellarmine relies to show that Peter was at Rome is the very passage now under consideration:

"That Peter was one time at Rome," he says, "we show first from the testimony of Peter himself, who thus speaks at the end of his first epistle: 'The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, salutes you.'"

He does not pretend to cite any other evidence from Scripture than this; nor does any other writer.

4. There remains the fourth opinion that the well known Babylon on the Euphrates was the place where the epistle was written. This was the opinion of Erasmus, Drusius, Lightfoot, Bengel, Wetstein, Basnage, Beausobre, and others. That this is the correct opinion seems to me to be clear from the following considerations:

(a) It is the most natural and obvious interpretation. It is that which would occur to the great mass of the readers of the New Testament now, and is that which would have been naturally adopted by those to whom the epistle was sent. The word *Babylon*, without something to give it a different application, would have been understood anywhere to denote the well known place on the Euphrates.

(b) There is, as has been observed already, no improbability that there was a Christian church there, but there are several circumstances which render it probable that this would be the case: (1) Babylon had been an important place, and its history was such and its relation to the Jews such as to make it probable that the attention of the apostles would be turned to it. (2) The apostles,

according to all the traditions which we have respecting them, traveled extensively in the East, and nothing would be more natural than that they should visit Babylon. (3) There were many Jews of the captivity remaining in that region, and it would be in the highest degree probable that they would seek to carry the gospel to their own countrymen there. See Koppe, Proleg., pp. 16-18. Jos. Ant., B. xv., ch. ii., § 2; ch. iii., § 1. Philo. De Virtut., p. 587.

These considerations make it clear that the place where the epistle was written was Babylon on the Euphrates, the place so celebrated in ancient sacred and profane history. If this be the correct view, then this is a fact of much interest, as showing that even in apostolic times there was a true church in the place once so distinguished for splendour and wickedness, and so memorable for its acts in oppressing the ancient people of God.

Our information respecting this church, however, ceases here. We know not by whom it was founded. We know not who were its pastors, nor do we know how long it survived. As Babylon, however, continued rapidly to decline, so that in the second century nothing remained but the walls (comp. Notes on Isa. 13:19), there is no reason to suppose that the church long existed there. Soon the ancient city became a heap of ruins; and excepting that now and then a Christian traveler or missionary has visited it, it is not known that a prayer has been offered there from generation to generation, or that amidst the desolations there has been a single worshipper of the true God. See this subject examined at length in *Bacon's Lives of the Apostles*, pp. 258-263.

In regard to the *time* when this first epistle was written, nothing certainly can be determined. There are no marks of time in the epistle itself, and there are no certain data from which we can determine when it was composed. Lardner supposes that it was in the year 63 or 64, or at the latest 65; Michaelis, that it was about the year 60. If it was written at Babylon, it was probably some time between the year 58 and 61. The time is not material, and it is impossible now to determine it.

3. *The characteristics of the First Epistle of Peter*

1. The epistles of Peter are distinguished for great tenderness of manner, and for bringing forward prominently the most consolatory parts of the gospel. He wrote to those who were in affliction; he was himself an old man (2 Pet. 1:14); he expected soon to be with his Saviour; he had nearly done with the conflicts and toils of life; and it was natural that he should direct his eye onward and should dwell on those things in the gospel which were adapted to support and comfort the soul. There is, therefore, scarcely any part of the New Testament where the ripe and mellow Christian will find more that is adapted to his matured feelings or to which he will more naturally turn.

2. There is great compactness and terseness of thought in his epistles. They seem to be composed of a succession of *texts*, each one fitted to constitute the subject of a discourse. There is more that a pastor would like to preach on in a course of expository lectures and less that he would be disposed to pass over as not so well adapted to the purposes of public instruction than in almost any other part of the New Testament. There is almost nothing that is local or of temporary interest. There are no discussions about points pertaining to Jewish customs such as we meet with in Paul. There is little that pertains particularly to one age of the world or country. Almost all that he has written is of universal applicability to Christians and may be read with as much interest and profit now by *us* as by the people to whom his epistles were addressed.

3. There is evidence in the epistles of Peter that the author was well acquainted with the writings of the apostle Paul. See this point illustrated at length in Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Neue Tes.* viii. 606-618, § 284, and Michaelis, *Intro.*, vol. iv. p. 323, seq. Peter himself speaks of his acquaintance with the epistles of Paul and ranks them with the inspired writings (2 Pet. 3:15,16): "Even as our beloved brother Paul also, according to the wisdom given unto him, has written unto you; as also in

all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures, unto their own destruction."

Indeed, to anyone who will attentively compare the epistles of Peter with those of Paul, it will be apparent that he was acquainted with the writings of the apostle of the Gentiles, and had become so familiar with the modes of expression which he employed that he naturally fell into it. There is that kind of coincidence which would be expected when one was accustomed to read what another had written, and when he had great respect for him, but not that when there was a purpose to *borrow* or *copy* from him. This will be apparent by a reference to a few parallel passages.

Paul

Peter

Eph. 1:3: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. See also 2 Cor. 1:3.

1 Pet. 1:3: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Col. 3:8: But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth.

1 Pet. 2:1: Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings.

Eph. 5:22: Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as unto the Lord.

1 Pet. 3:1: Likewise ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands.

Eph. 5:21: Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.

1 Pet. 5:5: Yea, all of you be subject one to another.

1 Thess. 5:6: Let us watch and be sober.

1 Pet. 5:8: Be sober: be vigilant. [In the Greek the same words, though the order is reversed.]

1 Cor. 16:20: Greet ye one another with a holy kiss. 2 Cor. 13:12; Rom. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:26.

1 Pet. 5:14: Greet ye one another with a kiss of love (*ἐν φιλήματι ἀγάπης*).

Rom. 8:18: The glory that shall be revealed unto us.

1 Pet. 5:1: The glory that shall be revealed.

Rom. 4:24: If we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead.

1 Pet. 1:21: Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead.

Rom. 13:1,3,4: Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. . . Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. See also the following passages:

1 Pet. 2:13,14: Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake; whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well.

Rom. 12:6,7.

1 Pet. 4:10.

1 Tim. 2:9.

1 Pet. 3:3.

1 Tim. 5:5.

1 Pet. 3:5.

These coincidences are not such as would occur between two authors when one had no

acquaintance with the writings of the other; and they thus demonstrate what may be implied in 2 Pet. 3:15, that Peter was familiar with the epistles of Paul. This also would seem to imply that the epistles of Paul were in general circulation.

4. "In the structure of his periods," say Michaelis, "St. Peter has this peculiarity, that he is fond of beginning a sentence in such a manner that it shall refer to a principal word in the preceding. The consequence of this structure is that the sentences, instead of being rounded according to the manner of the Greeks, are drawn out to a great length; and in many places where we should expect that a sentence would be closed, a new clause is attached, and another again to this, so that before the whole period comes to an end it contains parts which, at the commencement of the period, do not appear to have been designed for it." This manner of writing is also found often in the epistles of Paul.

The canonical authority of this epistle has never been disputed. For a view of the contents of it, see the analyses prefixed to the several chapters.