

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EPISTLE OF PETER

by

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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.

1. *The Genuineness and Authenticity of the Epistle*

It is well known that at an early period of the Christian history there were doubts respecting the canonical authority of the Second Epistle of Peter. The sole ground of the doubt was whether Peter was the author of it. Eusebius, in the chapter of his ecclesiastical history where he speaks of the New Testament in general, reckons it among the *αντιλεγόμενα* (*antilegomena*), or those books which were not universally admitted to be genuine; literally, "*those which were spoken against*" (B. iii. ch. 25). This does not imply that even he, however, disbelieved its genuineness, but merely that it was numbered among those about which there had not been always entire certainty. Jerome says, "Peter wrote two epistles, called Catholic; the second of which is denied by many to be his, because of the difference of style from the former." Origen, before him, had also said, "Peter, on whom the church is built, has left one epistle [universally] acknowledged. Let it be granted that he also wrote a second. For it is doubted of." See Lardner, vol. vi. p. 255, Ed. Lond., 1829.

Both the epistles of Peter, however, were received as genuine in the fourth and following centuries by all Christians except the Syrians. The first epistle was never doubted to have been the production of Peter. In regard to the second, as remarked above, it was doubted by some. The principal ground of the doubt, if not the entire ground, was the difference of style between the two, especially in the second chapter, and the fact that the old Syriac translator, though he admitted the Epistle of James which was also reckoned among the 'doubtful' epistles, did not translate the Second Epistle of Peter. That version was made, probably, at the close of the first century or in the second; and it is said that it is to be presumed that if this epistle had been then in existence and had been regarded as genuine, it would also have been translated by him.

It is of importance, therefore, to state briefly the evidence of the genuineness and authenticity of this epistle. In doing this it is proper to regard the *first* epistle as undoubtedly genuine and canonical, for that was never called in question. That being admitted, the genuineness of this epistle may be argued on the following grounds.

1. It does not appear to have been *rejected* by anyone. It was merely *doubted* whether it was genuine. How far even this *doubt* extended is not mentioned. It is referred to only by Jerome, Origen, and Eusebius, though there is not the least evidence that even *they* had any doubts of its genuineness. They merely state that there were some persons who had doubts on the subject from the difference of style between this and the former epistle. This fact, indeed, as Wall has remarked (Crit. Notes on the N.T. pp. 358,359), will serve at least to show the care which was evinced in admitting books to be canonical, proving that they were not received without the utmost caution, and that if the slightest doubt existed in the case of any one, it was honestly expressed.

2. Even all doubt on the subject disappeared as early as the third and fourth centuries, and the

epistle was received as being unquestionably the production of Peter. The effect of the examination in the case was to remove all suspicion, and it has never since been doubted that the epistle was written by Peter. At least no doubt has arisen except from the fact, stated by Jerome and Origen, that it was not universally admitted to be genuine.

3. This epistle purports to have been written by the author of the former, and has all the internal marks of genuineness which could exist.

(a) It bears the inscription of the name of the same apostle: "Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ" (ch. 1:1).

(b) There is an allusion in ch. 1:14 which Peter only could appropriately make, and which an impostor or forger of an epistle would hardly have thought of introducing: "Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ has showed me." Here there is an evident reference to the Saviour's prediction of the death of Peter recorded in John 21:18,19. It is conceivable, indeed, that an adroit forger of an epistle *might* have introduced such a circumstance; but the supposition that it is genuine is much more natural. It is such an allusion as Peter would naturally make. It would have required much skill and tact in another to have introduced it so as not to be easily detected, even if it had occurred to him to personate Peter at all. Would not a forger of an epistle have been likely to mention particularly what *kind* of death was predicted by the Saviour and not to have made a mere allusion?

(c) In ch. 1:16-18 there is another allusion of a similar kind. The writer claims to have been one of the "eye-witnesses of the majesty" of the Lord Jesus when he was transfigured in the holy mount. It was natural for Peter to refer to this, for he was with him. And he has mentioned it just as one would be likely to do who had actually been with him and who was writing from personal recollection. A forger of the epistle would have been likely to be more particular, and would have described the scene more minutely and the place where it occurred, and would have dwelt more on the nature of the evidence furnished there of the divine mission of the Saviour.

(d) In ch. 3:1 it is stated that this is a second epistle written to the same persons as a former one had been, and that the writer aimed at substantially the same object in both. Here the plain reference is to the first epistle of Peter which has always been acknowledged to be genuine. It may be said that one who forged the epistle might have made this allusion. This is true, but it may be doubtful whether he *would* do it. It would have increased the liability to detection, for it would not be easy to imitate the manner and to carry out the views of the apostle.

4. To these considerations it may be added that there is clear internal evidence of another kind to show that it was written by Peter. This evidence, too long to be introduced here, may be seen in Michaelis' Introduction, iv. 349-356. The sum of this internal evidence is that it would not have been practicable for a writer of the first or second century to have imitated Peter so as to have escaped detection; and that, in general, it is not difficult to detect the books that were forged in imitation of, and in the name of, the apostles.

As to the alleged objection in regard to the difference of the style in the second chapter, see Michaelis, iv. pp. 352-356. Why it was not inserted in the old Syriac version is not known. It is probable that the author of that version was exceedingly cautious and did not admit any books about which *he* had any doubt. The fact that this was doubted by some and that these doubts were not removed from his mind, as in the case of the Epistle of James, was a good reason for his not inserting it, though it by no means proves that it is not genuine.

It came, however, to be acknowledged afterwards by the Syrians as genuine and canonical. Ephrem the Syrian, a writer of the fourth century, not only quotes several passages of it but expressly

ascribes it to Peter. Thus, in the second volume of his Greek works, p. 387, he says: "The blessed Peter, also the Coryphaeus of the apostles, cries, concerning that day, saying, The day of the Lord cometh as a thief in the night, in which the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat." This is literally quoted (in the Greek) from 2 Peter 3:12. See Michaelis, as above, p. 348. And Asseman, in his catalogue of the Vatican Manuscripts, gives an account of a Syriac book of Lessons to be read, in which is one taken from this epistle. See Michaelis.

These considerations remove all reasonable doubt as to the propriety of admitting this epistle into the canon as the production of Peter.

2. *The Time when the Epistle was written*

In regard to the *time* when this epistle was written, nothing can be determined with absolute certainty. All that appears on that subject from the epistle itself is, that at the time of writing it the author was expecting soon to die (ch. 1:14): "Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath showed me." What evidence he had that he was soon to die he has not informed us, nor is it known even what he meant precisely by the word *shortly*. The Greek word (*ταχινή*) is indeed one that would imply that the event was expected not to be far off. But a man would not unnaturally use it who felt that he was growing old, even though he should in fact live several years afterwards. The Saviour (John 21:18) did not state to Peter *when* his death would occur, except that it would be when he should be "*old*." And the probability is, that the fact that he was growing *old* was the only intimation that he had that he was soon to die.

Ecclesiastical history informs us that he died at Rome, A.D. 66, in the 12th year of the reign of Nero. See Calmet, Art. Peter. Comp. Notes on John 21:18,19. Lardner supposes, from ch. 1:13-15 of this epistle, that this was written not long after the first, as he then says that he "would not be *negligent* to put them in remembrance of these things." The two epistles he supposes were written in the year 63 or 64, or at the latest 65. Michaelis supposes it was in the year 64; Calmet that it was in the year of Christ 68, or according to the Vulgar Era, A.D. 65. Probably the year 64 or 65 would not be far from the real date of this epistle. If so, it was, according to Calmet, one year only before the martyrdom of Peter (A.D. 66) and six years before the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, A.D. 71.

3. *The Persons to whom this Epistle was written, and the Place where*

On this subject there is no room for doubt. In ch. 3:1 the writer says, "This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance." This epistle was written, therefore, to the same persons as the former. On the question to whom that was addressed, see the Intro. to that epistle, §1. The epistles were addressed to persons who resided in Asia Minor, and in both they are regarded as in the midst of trials. No certain intimation of the *place* where this epistle was written is given in the epistle itself. It is probable that it was at the same place as the former; as [and?] if it had not been, we may presume that there would have been some reference to the fact that he had changed his residence, or some local allusion which would have enabled us to determine the fact. If he wrote this epistle from Babylon, as he did the former one (see Intro. to that epistle, §2), it is not known why he was so soon removed to Rome and became a martyr there. Indeed, everything respecting the last days of this apostle is involved in great uncertainty. See the article *Peter* in Calmet's Dictionary. See these questions examined also in Bacon's Lives of the Apostles, pp. 258-279.

4. *The Occasion on which the Epistle was written*

The first epistle was written in view of the trials which those to whom it was addressed were then enduring, and the persecutions which they had reason to anticipate (ch. 1:6,7; 4:12-19; 5:8-11). The main object of that epistle was to comfort them in their trials and to encourage them to bear them with a Christian spirit, imitating the example of the Lord Jesus. This epistle appears to have been written, not so much in view of persecutions and bodily sufferings real or prospective, as in view of the fact that there were teachers of error among them, the tendency of whose doctrine was to turn them away from the gospel.

To those teachers of error and to the dangers to which they were exposed on that account, there is no allusion in the first epistle. And it would seem not to be improbable that Peter had been informed that there were such teachers among them, after he had written and despatched that. Or if he was not thus *informed* of it, it seems to have occurred to him that this was a point of great importance which had not been noticed in the former epistle; and that an effort should be made by apostolic influence and authority to arrest the progress of error, to counteract the influence of the false teachers, and to confirm the Christians of Asia Minor in the belief of the truth.

A large part of the epistle, therefore, is occupied in characterizing the teachers of error, in showing that they would certainly be destroyed, and in stating the true doctrine in opposition to what they held. It is evident that Peter supposed that the danger to which Christians in Asia Minor were exposed from these errors was not less than that to which they were exposed from persecution, and that it was of as much importance to guard them from those errors as it was to sustain them in their trials.

The characteristics of the teachers referred to in this epistle, and the doctrines which they taught, were the following:

1. One of the prominent errors was a denial of the Lord that bought them (ch. 2:1). On the nature of this error, see Notes on that verse.
2. They gave indulgence to carnal appetites, and were sensual, corrupt, beastly, lewd (vs. 10,12,13,14,19. Comp. Jude 4,8,16). It is remarkable that so many professed *reformers* have been men who have been sensual, and lewd men who have taken advantage of their character as professed religious teachers and as *reformers* to corrupt and betray others. Such reformers often begin with pure intentions, but a constant familiarity with a certain class of vices tends to corrupt the mind and to awaken in the soul passions which would otherwise have slept, and they fall into the same vices which they attempt to reform. It should be said, however, that many professed reformers are corrupt at heart, and only make use of their pretended zeal in the cause of reformation to give them the opportunity to indulge their base propensities.
3. They were disorderly in their views and "*radical*" in their movements. The tendency of their doctrines was to unsettle the foundations of order and government, to take away all restraint from the indulgence of carnal propensities, and to break up the very foundations of good order in society (2:10-12). They "walked after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness." They "despised government" or authority. They were "presumptuous and self-willed." They "were not afraid to speak evil of dignities." They were like "natural brute beasts." They "spoke evil of the subjects which they did not understand."

It is by no means an uncommon thing for professed reformers to become anti-government men, or to suppose that all the restraints of law stand in their way and that they must be removed in order to success. They fix the mind on *one* thing to be accomplished. That thing magnifies itself until it fills all the field of vision. Everything which *seems* to oppose their efforts or to uphold the evil

which they seek to remove they regard as an evil itself, and as the laws and the government of a country often seem to sustain the evil, they become opposed to the government itself and denounce it as an evil. Instead of endeavouring to enlighten the public mind and to modify the laws by a course of patient effort, they array themselves against them and seek to overturn them. For the same reason also they suppose that *the church* upholds the evil, and [thus they] become the deadly foe of all church organizations.

4. They were seductive and artful, and adopted a course of teaching that was fitted to beguile the weak and especially to produce licentiousness of living (2:14). They were characterized by "adulterous" desires, and they practiced their arts particularly on the "unstable," those who were easily led away by any new and plausible doctrine that went to unsettle the foundations of rigid morality.

5. They adopted a pompous mode of teaching, distinguished for sound rather than for sense, and proclaimed themselves to be the special friends of liberal views and of a liberal Christianity (2:17,18,19). They were like "wells without water," "clouds that were carried about with a tempest." They spake "great swelling words of vanity," and they promised "liberty" to those who would embrace their views, or freedom from the restraints of bigotry and of a narrow and gloomy religion. This appeal is usually made by the advocates of error.

6. They had been professed Christians and had formerly embraced the more strict views on morals and religion which were held by Christians in general (2:20-22). From this, however, they had departed and had fallen into practices quite as abominable as those of which they had been guilty before their pretended conversion.

7. They denied the doctrines which the apostles had stated respecting the end of the world. The *argument* on which they based this denial was the fact that all things continued unchanged as they had been from the beginning, and that it might be inferred from that that the world would be stable (3:3,4). They saw no change in the laws of nature. They saw no indications that the world was drawing to a close. And they *inferred* that laws so stable and settled as those were which existed in nature would continue to operate, and that the changes predicted by the apostles were impossible.

A large part of the epistle is occupied in meeting these errors, and in so portraying the characters of their advocates as to show what degree of reliance was to be placed on their preaching. For a particular view of the manner in which these errors are met, see the analysis to chs. 2 and 3.

This epistle is characterized by the same earnest and tender manner as the first, and by a peculiarly "solemn grandeur of imagery and diction." The apostle in the last two chapters had to meet great and dangerous errors, and the style of rebuke was appropriate to the occasion. He felt that he himself was soon to die, and in the prospect of death his own mind was peculiarly impressed with the solemnity and importance of coming events. He believed that the errors which were broached tended to sap the very foundations of the Christian faith and of good morals, and his whole soul is roused to meet and counteract them. The occasion required that he should state in a solemn manner what *was* the truth in regard to the second advent of the Lord Jesus, what great changes *were* to occur, what the Christian *might* look for hereafter. And his soul kindles with the sublime theme, and he describes in glowing imagery and in impassioned language the end of all things, and exhorts them to live as became those who were looking forward to so important events. The practical effect of the whole epistle is to make the mind intensely solemn, and to put it into a position of waiting for the coming of the Lord.