

THE FIRST LETTER OF PETER - PART I

BACKGROUND TO THE LETTER

I. The first letter of Peter was, according to common tradition, written by St. Peter late in life to persecuted communities of Christians in Asia Minor (which is basically modern day Turkey) who were apparently recent converts from paganism.

A. The author identifies himself as "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ."

1. While pseudonyms were used in the ancient Roman world, in this case, it has been understood from an early time that St. Peter was in fact the author of this letter. See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Book IV ch. 9, sec. 2; Book 5, ch. 7, sec. 2; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book III, ch. 25 sec. 2.

2. Furthermore, the tone of the letter is that of authority, one who expects the churches in Asia Minor to accept his word. It would seem that no one other than an apostle or a successor to them could claim that authority.

3. In addition, in order for the work to have been pseudonymous, it would have to have been written well after St. Peter's death. And yet there is not reference to the persecutions in Rome, which began during St. Peter's life.

4. There are some who object that Peter, coming from the background of a common fisherman would not have been able to write in the elegant, flowing Greek that the letter employs. Others point out that the letter seems to be written at a time when the church in Asia Minor was being persecuted, and there is little evidence that the persecution under Nero has spread to Asia Minor by 67 A.D., the most likely year when St. Peter was crucified. Some also argue that, as long as St. Paul was alive, St. Paul, rather than St. Peter, would have been the one to write to the churches in Asia Minor, for he was the one who first evangelized them; thus, they conclude that the letter was written after Saints Peter and Paul were martyred in 67 A.D.

- However, Peter may well have learned Greek well in the 30 years between Jesus' Ascension and the likely time of the letter.

- Furthermore, the letter itself refers to a Silvanus, through whom the letter was sent. Silvanus was an associate of

Saints Paul and Timothy. See Acts 15:22, 16:19 (referring to a Silas, which seems to be an abbreviated version of the name); 2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1. Many theologians, from St. Jerome to Fr. Raymond Brown proposed that St. Peter may well have asked Silvanus to express his thoughts in better Greek.

- As to the persecutions, there is little evidence of when the persecutions began in Asia Minor. In general, troubles came shortly after the first Christians brought the Gospel to a given place. See, e.g., Acts 13:50, 14:19-20, 16:19-24, 17:5-9, 18:12-17.

- As to St. Paul, he usually wrote to individual churches and communities. It makes sense that the leader of the whole church would be the one to write to a broad spectrum of churches at once. The fact that there is no mention of St. Paul in Rome likely does indicate that the letter was written during the time from about 63-64 A.D. when he was free and outside of Rome.

B. The letter is apparently addressed to Christians in the five areas that together made up most of Asia Minor, whom St. Peter calls "chosen sojourners in the diaspora." The implication is that they viewed themselves as mere sojourners on earth.

1. They were apparently former pagans, for the letter refers to them as having been in "former ignorance," "called out of darkness" and "formerly no people." See 1 Peter 1:14, 2:9-10. Jewish Christians would have been called into greater light and would have been God's people even before their conversion, albeit in an incomplete state. The letter also refers to pagan conduct that the readers had apparently been involved in, and which no faithful Jew would commit. See 1 Peter 4:3-5.

2. St. Paul had first evangelized parts of Asia Minor during his missionary journey of 46-49 A.D., but his more complete evangelization of Asia Minor occurred in his last missionary journey from 54-58 A.D. Because the letter is written in part to areas in the north of Asia Minor that would have received the Gospel later in St. Paul's ministry, many of the Christians that the letter is addressed to may have been Christian for no more than 10 years. Furthermore, the letter indicates that the readers were not eyewitnesses to Christ. See 1 Peter 1:8-9.

3. The advice on how to deal with persecution in 1 Peter 3:13-22 and 4:12-19 indicates that the Christians to whom the

letter was addressed were being persecuted, although it seems that the persecution has recently begun or gotten worse.

C. It appears that the letter was written in late 63 A.D. or early 64 A.D.

1. The fact that this letter, unlike 2 Peter, does not refer to St. Paul indicates that it was written a few years after St. Paul visited the region, and thus was probably written in the 60s A.D. Furthermore, the Gospel seems to have spread extensively throughout Asia Minor by the time that the letter was written. And this comprehensive evangelization did not seem to occur until St. Paul's final journey in the later 50s.

2. However, St. Paul was in Rome in the early 60s A.D. until he was released in 63 A.D. Thus, the lack of any reference to greetings from St. Paul, especially given the clear reference to St. Mark, an assistant to both St. Peter and St. Paul, makes it also seem likely that it was written in 63 A.D. or later. See 1 Peter 5:13.

3. There was a colossal fire in Rome in the July, 64 A.D. and Nero, as part of an effort to blame it on the Christians, began persecuting them shortly thereafter. Because the letter does not refer to these events, despite a plain reference to government officials, see 1 Peter 2:13-14, it was probably written before them.

II. The overall structure of the letter involves an introduction and blessing, three main parts, and a conclusion that refers to Mark and Silvanus.

A. The introduction sets up the theme that we are sojourners here on earth, traveling on a pilgrimage to heaven, who must now endure trials to win the prize.

- The introduction strikes an optimistic note, describing the faith and the "indescribable and glorious joy" of these believers to whom it is written.

B. The first major section, from chapter 1, verse 11 to chapter 2, verse 10, calls Christians to a charity and holiness of life that is separate from the decadence of the world that we have been called out of.

- It appeals to the fact that the prophets prepared for Christ and Christ Himself bought them with His blood. The idea is that the Christians must see the incomparable value of our salvation and not give it up for perishable things.

- This section ends with a stirring description of the glory of Christians as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of His own."
- The emphasis here is for Christians to see themselves as bringing goodness, truth and light to this corrupt, deceptive and shadowy world.

C. The second major section, from chapter 2, verse 11 to chapter 3, verse 12, however, argues that Christians should give themselves as an example to the world.

- This section thus describes the need for good works, loyalty to the government, loyalty to masters, obedience and love in marriage, and compassion even to enemies. The idea is that, by such conduct, Christians will persuade the world of the truth we have.

D. The third major section, from chapter 3, verse 13 to chapter 5, verse 11, describes how to deal with persecution.

- This section exhorts the reader to understand and be able to explain his faith, to be united with Christ in spirit and actions, and to be united to each other in mutual charity and holiness, under the guidance of pastors.
- This unity, righteousness and persuasion will help persuade the world and, even if the world will not be persuaded, will win great merit before God.

E. The conclusion sends greeting, and describes the company of Silvanus and Mark. It also refers to the author living in "Babylon," which was an early Christian term for the decadence of Rome. See, e.g., Rev. 14:8, 16:19, 17:5, 18:2, 10. The image is of a city that persecutes believers, as Babylon of old conquered the Chosen People in 597-587 B.C. But Babylon herself was to be redeemed along with the other nations, see Ps. 87; and so will Rome be redeemed.

III. The letter strongly emphasizes the themes of union with Christ, especially in the context of baptism and suffering for the faith, of a holiness of life that persuades the world, and of treating this life as a journey through this perishable realm to an imperishable one.

A. The letter refers to the theme of struggling through this "trial by fire" several times.

1. As Jesus' preaching did, it presents persecutions as something to be expected. See Matt. 10:16-25, 24:9-14; Mark 10:30, 13:9-13; John 15:18-25 1 Peter 4:4, 12.
2. But the persecutions are of great value, for they prove the faith like gold tested in fire, and bring us great merit before God. See 1 Peter 1:6-7, 2:20, 3:14, 17, 4:13, 16-19, 5:10.
3. In dealing with persecution, the letter reminds us that Christ suffered with us and gives us strength. See 1 Peter 2:23:18, 4:13. The unity of the Church is also crucial in maintaining the strength that none alone has. See 1 Peter 5:5-11.

B. The letter calls upon Christians neither to give into the world nor to ignore it, but to persuade the world by their knowledge, their good conduct and their courage.

1. There is a strong calling to be separate from the worldly influence that one has left behind with baptism. See Peter 1:13-16, 2:1-3, 3:3-5, 4:1-4, 8-9.
2. But, to the degree that the world has rightful, lawful standards, Christians must uphold them, lest the world see evil in Christians. See 1 Peter 1:13-14, 20, 4:15-16.
3. The hope is that, when the world sees Christians living this holy life, upholding all that is good in society, but also rising vastly above it, many will come to believe. See 1 Peter 2:9, 12, 15, 3:2, 16. Christians should also know their faith, that they may be able to persuade with calmness and knowledge. See 1 Peter 3:15-16.

C. There is a strong notion of journeying through this life, a temporal realm, toward the glorious final kingdom.

1. The letter refers three times to Christians as sojourners. See 1 Peter 1:1, 17, 2:11. The implication being that we are in a land foreign to our own. See also Phil 3:20.
2. The letter also refers to the recipients as being in the "diaspora," which was a term for the Jewish people who live away from the Promised Land. See 1 Peter 1:1. The implication is that Christians likewise live away from the final Promised

Land.

D. There are also some interesting teachings about the spiritual realm, such as the fact that angels themselves learned from Jesus' life on earth and that Jesus preached to the dead. See 1 Peter 1:12, 3:19, 4:6. The letter also refers very much to the idea that priests (presbytoi in Greek) are shepherds under the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. See 1 Peter 5:1-4. There is no contradiction between Jesus as the Shepherd and the existence of other shepherds to represent Him. See Jer. 3:15, 23:4, 31:10; Ez. 34:23-24.