

THE SECOND LETTER OF PETER - PART I

OVERVIEW, THEMES, AND THE GREETING

I. The second letter of Peter is a follow up on the first letter and is addressed to Christians in general, but seems to have had th Christians in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) as the immediate audience.

A. The letter is attributed to "Symeon Peter" and refers to the first letter of Peter as its precursor. See 2 Peter 1:1, 3:1.

1. There has, however, from early time been some dispute about the authorship. For example, Eusebius, the court historian of the Emperor Constantine, said that there was a dispute about whether Peter wrote the letter and whether it is a part of the Bible. See Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History Book III, Ch. 3, section 1, ch. 25, section 3. However, most of the early Church fathers, such as St. Clement of Alexandria, St. Athanasius, St. Jerome, and Origin, considered it to have been written by St. Peter.

2. The opposition view is based both upon its different style from the first letter of Peter, and upon some references, especially to the collected works of St. Paul, as an understood part of Scripture that would reflect a date after St. Peter's martyrdom. See 2 Peter 3:15-16. It also refers to the "apostles" as a group that seems to be somewhat distinct from the author. See 2 Peter 3:1-2. Some scholars thus propose that either another author writing with the authority of Rome used Peter as a pseudonym, or possibly that the disciples of St. Peter gathered his ideas together.

3. St. Jerome proposed that St. Peter used two different secretaries to compose the two letters, accounting for their different styles.

4. Without resolving the issue of authorship, the Church has declared that both epistles of Peter are part of the Bible. See, e.g., Council of Trent, Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures (1546.) All other Christians likewise accept this epistle as a part of the Bible.

B. The letter could have been written in the mid 60s through the late 90s.

1. If written by St. Peter, it would have had to have been written after the first letters, which in all likelihood dates from 63

to 64 A.D., but before the death of St. Peter in 65 or 66 A.D. The letter refers to the likelihood that St. Peter will be martyred soon, but that expectation could have existed anywhere in the early to mid-60s.

2. If written by a disciple of Peter, it could have been written anytime after the death of St. Peter until the end of the first century.

3. The letter does seem to cross reference some teachings from the epistle of Jude. In particular the second chapter of 2 Peter seems to elaborate on verses 4 - 18 of the epistles of Jude, and chapter 3 on verses 14 and 15, and 17-25 of Jude. However, the epistle of Jude could have been written anywhere from the early 60s to the 90s. Thus that fact does not resolve the issue.

C. While there is no specific group addressed in the letter, the immediate audience seems to have been the same as that of the first letter of Peter, which was addressed to Christians in Asia Minor. See 2 Peter 3:1. It is also an audience that St. Paul had specifically addressed letters to, letters now accepted as part of scripture. See 2 Peter 3:16. St. Paul specifically wrote to Galatia, Ephesus, and Colossae, but his letters may well have quickly been circulated all over the province of Asia Minor.

II. The letter's main point is to promote virtuous life and sound doctrine and to warn against false teachers, especially those who either denied the Second Coming of Christ or who downplayed the role of Jesus as Lord and the angels as assisting in judgment.

A. After the introduction, the first part, which goes through chapter 1, promotes together fidelity to the teachings that have been received and the virtuous life. The chapter makes clear that the two aspects grow together.

B. The second part, which consists of chapter 2, is a thundering denunciation of false teachers. The letter says that their false teaching is based upon greed and an immoral lifestyle. See 2 Peter 2:2, 12-16. And it focuses on the punishments that are reserved for them, with images of the fallen angels, the Great Flood and of Sodom and Gomorrah. See 2 Peter 2;4-10, 17-19.

C. The third part, which consists of chapter 3, describes the heresies that the letter is arguing against and refutes them. In particular, it seemed that some people were denying the Second Coming of Christ, on the grounds that it should have come already. See 2 Peter 3:3-10. The letter presents this delay in terms of giving people more opportunity to repent, but an opportunity that could vanish at any moment. See 2 Peter 3:9-10. This part also exhorts people to righteous living in preparation for judgment. See 2 Peter 3:11-15. Apparently, some people were distorting the words of St. Paul in an undescribed way, an error

St. Peter wishes to correct.

D. Overall, there is an emphasis that doctrinal matters are important, that errors are very serious, and one should not assume that those in error are blameless. The letter warns that doctrinal errors spring from a desire to avoid the truth and the demands of a moral life.

III. The letter develops many of the themes in the letter of Jude and contains some particularly strong emphases on glory and inspiration.

A. The second and third chapters of 2 Peter reflect many of the themes of the letter of Jude.

1. The denunciation of the false teachers in chapter 2 uses many of the same comparisons as the letter of Jude, including: (1) the reference to fallen angels, see 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6; (2) the punishment of Sodom and Gommorah, see 2 Peter 2:6-10, Jude 7; and (3) the analogy to fruitless trees, gloom and storms, see 2 Peter 2:17-19, Jude 12-13. False teachers are also compared to irrational animals and to the greed of Balaam. See 2 Peter 2:15-16, Jude 11-12. See Num 22-24. Both letters also compare the rescue of the faithful to the Exodus from Egypt. Se 2 Peter 1:12; Jude 5.

2. The Second Letter of Peter and Jude also say that the heretics and scoffers were long predicted. See 2 Peter 3:2-4; Jude 17-18. They both trace their errors back to sinfulness and greed and call the false teachers to blots on the faithful. See 2 Peter 2:2-3, 10-16, 18-19; Jude 11-16. Both letter condemn them for reviling angels and great things they do not understand. Se 2 Peter 2:10-11; Jude 8, 10

3. The Second Letter of Peter does omit some references to Jewish non-canonical writings in the Letter of Jude such as the prophecies of Adam and the Assumption of Moses. See Jude 9, 14. The Second Letter of Peter may have done so because of its particular emphasis on the inspiration of Sacred Scriptures. See 2 Peter 1:20, 3:16.

B. Among the more unique aspects of this letter is the emphasis on the Transfiguration and on the promises of Scriptures.

1. Near the beginning, the letter presents the author's personal witness of the Transfiguration and on the inspiration of Scripture as the guarantors of Jesus' promises. See 2 Peter 1:16-21.

2. Then, near the end, the letter also again emphasizes the overall theme of glorious transformation into the new heavens

and new earth, a transformation that one must be pure in order to make, and then warns about the distortion of Scriptures that people use to avoid this conclusion. See 2 Peter 3:10-16.

IV. The opening lines of the epistle introduce the themes of trust and service to God in truth.

A. The letter is from "Symeon Peter," who introduces Himself as a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ. In the first letter, Peter also introduces himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, reflecting his authority.

- The name Symeon, or Simon, is not used much after the Gospels for St. Peter. The other five uses in the New Testament are from: (1) the conversion of Cornelius; (2) on a related point, St. Peter's vision of the spread of the clean and unclean animals, which represented the preaching of the Gospels to the Gentiles; and (3) the Council of Jerusalem, where the Apostles settled the issue of the requirements to be imposed upon Gentile converts. See Acts 10:5, 18, 32, 11:13, 15:14. In all of those cases, the authority of St. Peter and the expansion of the Church were themes. Here the use of the name Symeon, especially with the more Hebrew spelling, may well emphasize the Jewish background of St. Peter and the unity of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) and the new Scriptures. It may also emphasize the fact that St. Peter was also the Simon who personally witnessed the events of Jesus' life, and especially the Transfiguration that the letter refers to.

2. The letter also adds the designation slave (doulos, as compared to diakonos, that is, a servant) of Jesus Christ, perhaps to emphasize that all legitimate authority comes must be based upon obedience to God. Moses and David were also described as servants of God, a status that emphasized their status and authority. See Duet. 34:5, 2 Sam. 7:5-29; cf. Is. 52:13-15; Phil 2:7. There is also perhaps an emphasis of the theme from Romans that one is either a slave of God who makes us His sons or a slave of sin. See Rom. 6:5-23; 1 Peter 2:19.

B. The letter is not addressed to any particular people, although the letter indicates that the immediate recipients were likely the same as that of the first letter. See 2 Peter 3:1. It is likely that, at the time of this writing the author was well aware that the letter would be widely distributed as St. Paul's letters were, and so focused on a more general audience.

1. The letter is instead addressed in general to recipients who in general "have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours." There is an emphasis of equality in the faith, although the author is clearly writing from the standpoint of authority in the church. Part of the idea, as the letter will develop, is that immense glory is promised to all who are faithful, regardless of

the position in the Church.

2. This faith is "in the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ." There is an emphasis both on the holiness of God, and of the only way of arriving at this holiness, i.e. the salvation won by Jesus Christ. The author wants to emphasize both the importance of attaining the righteousness of God (perhaps in contrast to those who would live in decadence, presuming upon His mercy) and the fact that we are saved from sins, not by ourselves but by Jesus Christ (perhaps in contrast to those who would diminish the centrality of His saving mission.) The fact that the definite article ("ton," which means "the," but is often used where the definite article would not be used in English) appears only once in front of "our God and Savior Jesus Christ" indicates that the two nouns are connected and thus the author is including Jesus as God.

C. As with many other New Testament epistles, the author here wishes grace and peace to the readers. See Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 or. 2:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 1:3; 1 Peter 1:2.

- Here, however, the author here adds a wish that the peace be multiplied among the readers, indicating the fact that their common faith is meant to increase the grace for each other. The letter will later emphasize that unity and self-control will make the people fruitful, while the schisms and vices of the false teachers make them unfruitful and blind. See 1 Peter 1:5-9; 2:17-19.

- There is also an emphasis on the knowledge of Jesus, as opposed to mere opinion. The letter will several times emphasize this importance of knowing Jesus in sound doctrine as leading to salvation. See 2 Peter 1:5-7, 19-21, 3:18.