

I.

Getting Our Bearings in 2 Peter

Introduction

Who wrote 2 Peter? Our author identifies himself in his opening sentence as ‘Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ’ and there is plenty of strong evidence from within the letter to support this claim. Many academics have, however, expressed doubt. For example, Bauckhman (*Jude, 2 Peter*: Waco, Word, 1983) argues that the claim to ‘Petrine authorship was intended to be an entirely *transparent* fiction’. In other words, everybody knew that the letter wasn’t really written by Peter, who had died years before, perhaps in A.D. 64/65 in Rome. But arguing that the writer uses a ‘transparent fiction’ would seem to be completely at odds with a book which focuses on the reliability of God’s word. Green (*2 Peter and Jude*: Leicester, IVP, 1968) puts the argument for Peter as the author clearly. Those interested in exploring these sorts of questions will do best to consult other commentaries where considerable space is sometimes given to issues of literary style, date, similarity to other pseudepigraphy in the postapostolic age and other related matters.

The text of the letter itself provides us with compelling evidence that Peter was indeed the author. What we know of Peter from elsewhere in Scripture can be seen reflected in the content of the letter. Our writer introduces himself with the Greek transliteration of his Hebrew name 'Simeon', which was used also at Acts 15:14. He hints in 1:14 that he expects to be martyred. This would fit with what the Lord Jesus told Peter to expect in a personal conversation (John 21:18, 19). Importantly, our author views himself as an eyewitness of the events of the Transfiguration, both seeing and hearing what transpired (1:16-18). He calls this letter his 'second letter' (3:1) which fits with the existence of 1 Peter. He also refers to the apostle Paul as 'our dear brother Paul' (3:15, 16) which implies our writer knew Paul personally (3:15, 16). The evidence mounts up and encourages us to take the letter at face value as the words of Peter, a servant (or, literally, a 'slave') of Jesus Christ (1:1a).

In his first letter, Peter wrote to help a church facing external pressure. The churches in Asia were experiencing suffering, opposition and marginalisation (see 1 Pet. 1:6; 3:15; 4:3,4; 4:12ff; 5:9). In this second letter, Peter writes about a very different context. Here the churches are facing the internal problem of false teachers (2:1). External pressures like persecution are often much easier to spot than dangers within the church. But attacks from within may quietly develop in ways which can cause far greater damage to the community of God's people.

What issues does Peter need to address?

The context of this letter is the rise of false teachers within the early church (2:1). This is the only time that the word

for 'false teacher' is used within the New Testament. Clearly, these teachers were introducing destructive heresies into the church. What does the letter reveal about this false teaching?

1) No return of Christ

Peter feels the need to declare that he wasn't making things up when he taught about the 'coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power' (1:16) – it wasn't a cleverly devised story or myth (ESV). The only reason Peter would need to say this would be if the false teachers were dismissing the idea of a personal return of the Lord Jesus.

2) No judgment

If the Lord Jesus Christ isn't returning, presumably He won't be judging us all at the end either. This seems to have been another strand of what the false teachers were saying. They scoffed at the idea that Jesus would return and also at the idea that history was moving towards one particular point, when all would stand before the risen Lord Jesus Christ as Judge. They said, 'Where is this "coming" he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation' (3:4). Their expectation was that everything would always go on just as it always had done.

3) No boundaries

The false teaching seems to have reflected the next logical step too. If there is to be no return of Christ and no judgment, we can do whatever we like. There will be no accountability. We might as well ignore God's word from the past and just follow our instincts, as animals

do (2:12). This is exactly what the false teachers were doing. They appealed to the 'the lustful desires of the flesh' (2:18). Peter is concerned that many would follow them into 'depraved conduct', behaviour which will bring 'the way of truth into disrepute' (2:2).

Denying the personal return of our Lord Jesus Christ puts the church on a slippery slope down to moral chaos. Peter wrote because he could see how dangerous these men and their teachings would be to the church.

He looked ahead and could see the various ways that these doctrinal and moral errors would harm believers. What particular concerns were uppermost in his mind?

1) The danger of losing their footing

How easy it would be for the believers to get swept along with the voices proclaiming moral freedom. 'If God has made us with these desires then how can it be wrong to express ourselves like this?' That message sounded plausible. 'How on earth will we ever make a difference with the gospel if the world feels judged by our behaviour? The church will be far more relevant and the gospel far more appealing if we move with the times.' The message was seductive and attractive. How easy it would be for believers to get sucked in and to fall (3:17). Peter realised that even though the believers were currently 'firmly established' (1:12), they could easily drift, getting carried away by the strong currents of false teaching.

2) The danger of losing confidence in God's word

Orthodox beliefs were clearly being mocked and ridiculed (3:3, 4). Worse still, doubts were being

sown. Perhaps the message about the return of Christ really was just a cleverly devised story (1:16). God's word in the Old Testament is, well, so old. Stirring up thoughts like these could easily rock confidence in God's word. When believers lose confidence in God's word, they have no secure mooring to prevent them drifting away.

3) **The danger of losing focus on our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ**

If we doubt or deny that the Lord Jesus is returning in person as Judge then something about our relationship with Him is lost. Our knowledge of Christ is diminished. Against this background, Peter wants to strengthen the relationship between the believers and their Lord. This relationship must be worked out in lives devoted to Him. Peter closes his letter with a call for the believers to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (3:18).

These three issues are interconnected but viewing the whole situation from these different angles helps us to enter Peter's mindset. It also helps us in thinking about the structure of the letter as Peter's structure closely follows and addresses his main concerns.

Understanding the Structure of 2 Peter

We can observe a number of key movements within the letter. These appear to correspond to the main issues identified above and they appear to be arranged in this chiastic pattern.