

AUTHORSHIP OF 2 PETER

Through the centuries there have always been some rumblings about the authorship of 2 Peter, although by and large it has been accepted as authentically Petrine. As Michael Green explains in his commentary on 2 Peter: “This Epistle has had a very rough passage down the centuries. Its entry into the Canon was precarious in the extreme. At the Reformation it was deemed second-class Scripture by Luther, rejected by Erasmus, and regarded with hesitancy by Calvin.”¹ But to the extent that in the past there were at times rumblings, the pendulum has swung the other way. According to Thomas Schreiner, it is now the prevailing position that Peter did not author the epistle:

The burning question in 2 Peter is whether it is authentic, that is, was the letter truly written by Peter, the apostle of Jesus Christ? Most scholars are now convinced that the letter was not written by Peter. They identify it as a pseudonymous writing, composed in Peter’s name to convey his authority to the next generation (or generations).²

The question this swing in scholarship raises, of course, is what has changed or what is the new evidence that argues against Petrine authorship. In my view, this is a result of nothing more than a bias and many modern scholars are willing to make most any argument to preserve their commitment. Green is spot on when he comments on this phenomenon: “It is unfortunate to find in many commentaries on

¹ Michael Green, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 2 Peter and Jude* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press 1987), 29.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers 2003), 255.

2 Peter a virtual abandonment of the normal criteria used for establishing the authenticity of any other ancient documents... Nothing has been demonstrated in the language, style or content of 2 Peter which falsifies the claim that it is a mid-first century AD letter, deriving from Simon Peter.”³ The purpose of this paper is to summarize and address the arguments for and against the Petrine authorship of 2 Peter, and ultimately, to argue that the evidence strongly favors that the historical Peter, apostle of Jesus, authored the epistle.

In his commentary on 2 Peter, Douglas Moo summarizes the primary modern arguments that Peter did not author the epistle:

Why is it, then, that a quick survey of recent commentaries reveals that more than half of them do not think that the apostle Peter wrote this letter? Scholars cite six main reasons. (1) The letter is filled with language and concepts drawn from the Hellenistic world. (2) The false teaching combatted in the letter is second-century Gnosticism. (3) The letter’s assumption that the letters of Paul were part of Scripture (cf. 3:15-16) was not possible in the lifetime of the apostles. (4) References to apostolic tradition (cf. 3:2, 16) betray a late date, when there was a fixed ecclesiastical authority (what some scholars have labeled ‘early Catholicism’). (5) The early church expressed a lot of doubts about whether 2 Peter should be accepted into the canon. (6) The letter takes the form of a ‘testament,’ in which a person would write in the name of a great hero of the faith after that hero’s death.⁴

What is most interesting about these arguments against Petrine authorship is that they are often coming from those who consider themselves evangelical, and indeed, they do not necessarily reject the canonicity of the book:

Scholars who are convinced by these arguments that Peter could not have written the letter therefore conclude that it is *pseudonymous* – literally, ‘a falsely named’ book. Many books of this sort were written by Jews in the centuries just before and just after Christ—books

³ Green, 30.

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House 1996), 22.

claiming to be written by Adam or Enoch or Moses or Abraham.... Viewed in this light, it is possible to believe at the same time that Peter did not write 2 Peter and that the Bible is without any error.⁵

Each of these points can be countered with reasonable arguments that are more plausible than arguing that someone pretending to be Peter wrote the epistle.

The first objection noted by Moo is really an objection that 1 and 2 Peter are quite different in many ways, a point that cannot be reasonably disputed. As Baukham—a leading advocate for non-Petrine authorship—explains his objection: “The language alone... makes it improbable that Peter could have written 2 Peter, while the author’s preference for Hellenistic terminology... can only implausibly be attributed to Peter... The relationship of 1 and 2 Peter is ambiguous in its relevance to the question of Petrine authorship, but certainly Peter cannot be the real author of both letters...”⁶ Green, although he advocates Petrine authorship, readily admits that there are stylistic differences: “There is a very great stylistic difference between the two letters. The Greek of 1 Peter is polished, cultured, dignified; it is among the best in the New Testament. The Greek of 2 Peter is grandiose; it is rather like baroque art, almost vulgar in its pretentiousness and effusiveness.”⁷ But as Green further points out, “something of the force of these objections can be met by supposing, with Jerome, that Peter used a different secretary, and that he allowed him a large say in the form of the composition. This appears to have been the case

⁵ Moo, 22-23.

⁶ Richard J. Baukham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco: Word Books 1983), 158-59.

⁷ Green, 23-24.

with 1 Peter, where the stylistic polish may well be due to Sylvanus... This view is strengthened by several stylistic resemblances between the Epistles which, in their way, are as remarkable as the differences.”⁸ Even Baukham candidly admits the strength of the secretary argument when he states that the “evidence... would be consistent with a secretary hypotheses in which the secretary is not Peter’s amanuensis but his agent.”⁹

Another reasonable explanation is that the linguistic differences are being blown out of proportion, and in any event, to argue that a Galilean fisherman could not have written 2 Peter is both conjectural and narrow. Schreiner forcefully makes this argument in his commentary on 2 Peter:

Scholars often point to the linguistic differences between the two letters, and the differences are not to be denied. And yet they can also be overemphasized. We have noted above that 2 Peter is called Hellenistic because of terms like “goodness” (arête) and “eyewitnesses” (epoptai). And yet 1 Peter used the term “goodness” as well, even if it is in the plural (1 Peter 2:9). And the verbal form of “eyewitness” (epopto) is used in both 1 Peter 2:1 and 3:2. We can agree that 2 Peter has a certain Hellenistic dress, but the question is whether the language used is unlikely for a Palestinian fishermen. We must remind ourselves that we should conceive of Peter as a businessman who engaged in physical labor and commerce. When we add to this the fact that Galilee was influenced by Hellenism and Greek culture, it is not astonishing that he would be familiar with Greek philosophical terms. The terms he used would not require a thorough study of Greek philosophy or classics, nor did Peter use the terms in a technical sense. Indeed, Peter likely used Hellenistic terms to speak to the culture of his day.¹⁰

⁸ Green, 24.

⁹ Baukham, 159.

¹⁰ Schreiner, 264-65.

Likewise, Moo states: “But (a) there is nothing in the letter that Peter, after many years of ministry in the Greek world, could not have written; (b) Peter may have deliberately chosen to write in this style because of the needs of his readers; and (c) the more commonplace Greek of 1 Peter may be the result of the help of an amanuensis (Silvanus?—see 1 Peter 5:12).”¹¹ Schreiner expounds nicely on the point that we should actually expect Peter’s writing style to change to fit the circumstances required of his audience:

It is that the thought of 2 Peter is too different from that of 1 Peter for both to have come from the same mind. Naturally the subject matter of 1 and 2 Peter is quite different, for these Epistles are written to two entirely different situations... 1 Peter envisages Christians facing persecution, 2 Peter Christians facing false teaching of a Gnostic flavor... Both letters are determined, as far as subject matter goes, by the pastoral needs which evoked them, and herein lies the difference in doctrinal emphasis between them.¹² (28)

For these reasons, in my mind, it is purely conjectural to argue that a single writer cannot write in two different styles. And, as Schreiner points out, “arguments from style are hardly conclusive when the corpus is so small.”¹³

Additional response to the stylistic argument can also be made from more recent scholarship concerning the Asiatic style of writing. According to Green, 2 Peter fits within a known style of writing that explains the differences between 1 and 2 Peter and fits the context of 2 Peter:

...both the style and the diction of 2 Peter belong to a quite deliberate pattern. It is now clear that there was a definite Asiatic style of

¹¹ Moo, 24.

¹² Green, 27-28.

¹³ Schreiner, 265.

writing, with a florid, verbose type of diction verging on the bizarre, which was a far cry from the canons of classical simplicity... Judged by this sort of literary standard, the style of 2 Peter no longer seems so remarkable. Indeed, it fits very well the varied emotional thoughts that lie behind this stirring Epistle.¹⁴

In addition, we must also account for other possible influences on the language of the epistle, including possible reliance on an older oral or written tradition: “When, in addition to all this, it is remembered that part of the difficulties in the diction of this Epistle arise from the Aramaic thought which lies behind it, and the possibility that it may be dependent upon traditional oral or written material for use against heretics... the language of 2 Peter need no longer be a serious stumbling-block to accepting the authenticity of the letter if it should commend itself on other grounds.”¹⁵

The second argument against Petrine authorship is that 2 Peter is addressing the Gnostic heresy that came after the first century. This argument is particularly weak, and indeed many critics like Baukham must concede the point. While Baukham dates the book in the last 25 years of the first century, he maintains that “[t]he opponents are not second-century Gnostics.”¹⁶ There is no indication in the text that Peter was dealing with full-blown Gnosticism, and indeed, “[n]othing the false teachers were propagating is unknown in the first century church.”¹⁷ At the heart of this objection is the question of when 2 Peter was written. Many of the

¹⁴ Green, 25-26.

¹⁵ Green, 26-27.

¹⁶ Baukham, 158.

¹⁷ Moo, 24.

critics are quick to argue that the book “is not quoted and is not *certainly* referred to by a single writer in the first or second century.”¹⁸ But in fact, there is a strong possibility of allusions to 2 Peter in *1 Clement* (AD 95), *2 Clement* (AD 150), Aristides (AD 130), *Barnabas*, *Shepherd of Hermas* (AD 120), Valentinus (AD 130), Hippolytus (AD 180), and Iranaeus.¹⁹ There may also be allusions to 2 Peter in the Ignatian letters and *Martyrdom of Polycarp* as well.²⁰

Green argues, based on the references to 2 Peter in the early literature, for a first century date:

The external evidence is inconclusive. No book in the Canon is so poorly attested among the Fathers, yet 2 Peter has incomparably better support for its inclusion than the best attested of the excluded books. It is not cited by name until Origen, at the beginning of the third century... Yet it was used in Egypt long before this. Not only was it contained in the Sahidic and Bohairic versions of the New Testament, dated from the late second and fourth centuries respectively, but we are told that Clement of Alexandria had it in his Bible and wrote a commentary on it. This takes us back to at least the middle of the second century. The *Apocalypse of Peter*, written somewhere between AD 110-140, makes much use of 2 Peter, which throws the date of our Epistle back further still.²¹

Of course, establishing a first century date does not prove Peter wrote the book, but it does rebut the argument—based on a second century date—that Peter could not have written it.

¹⁸ Alvah Hovey, ed., *An American Commentary on the New Testament: Timothy to Peter* (Valley Forge: Judson Press 1890), 75; Schreiner, 258.

¹⁹ Schreiner, 262-63; Green, 20.

²⁰ Schreiner, 262.

²¹ Green, 19-20.

The third argument is based on Peter's reference to Paul's writings as scripture. As the argument goes, Paul's corpus of writings was certainly not organized in the first century, and this means a later author must have written the book. But as Schreiner argues, Peter does not refer to or suggest a completed canon of Paul's writings, and moreover, "[t]he authority he assigns to the Pauline letters harmonizes with Paul's own estimate of his apostolic authority..."²² The fourth argument against Petrine authorship is that 2 Peter refers to apostolic traditions of the past and an ecclesiastical authority not present during Peter's life. However, "[n]othing in 2 Peter suggests any kind of ecclesiastical organization or hierarchy; and 'early Catholicism' itself is a dubious concept."²³ As to references to apostolic tradition, it is writing something into the text that is not there to take a reference to "your apostles" to mean that the author necessarily looks to a past group of which he is not a part. The fifth argument, that the early church had doubts about the canonicity of 2 Peter was addressed in part above. "While some Christians expressed doubts about 2 Peter, many others accepted the book from the beginning. People probably had doubts because the book was not widely used and because there were so many Petrine forgeries about."²⁴

Finally, critics like Baukham argue that 2 Peter was a "testament," a genre of literature typically written anonymously and attributed to a hero of the faith. As Baukham explains, "Second Peter is fictionally represented as written shortly before

²² Schreiner, 269.

²³ Moo, 24.

²⁴ Moo, 24.

Peter's death (1:14) and therefore in Rome... This would not need to imply that it was really written in Rome if 2 Peter were not a real letter, but since it is written to specific churches (3:15) it is a likely deduction that it was sent to them from the church of Rome."²⁵ Baukham then argues that the book was basically authored by "an unknown Christian leader on behalf of the church of Rome."²⁶ Because of Peter's prominence and connections to Rome, "the choice of Peter was the natural pseudonym in a letter from the church at Rome."²⁷ Baukham further explains the purpose of 2 Peter as a testament:

What was implied in the author of 2 Peter's adoption of pseudonymity and of the 'testament' genre? Possibly an intention of writing not as an individual but as representing the Roman church and therefore under the name of its greatest leader... the intention of defending the apostolic message in a postapostolic age...By contrast with the false teachers, who were claiming to correct the apostles' message, our author sets no store by his own authority or any message of his own. His authority lies in the faithfulness with which he transmits, and interprets for a new situation, the normative teaching of the apostles. 'Peter's testament' is the ideal literary vehicle for these intentions.²⁸

By arguing the 2 Peter is a testament, Baukham can stride the fence on canonicity, arguing that 2 Peter is not Petrine and yet there is no fraud since the first century audience understood it as a pseudonymous testament: "The pseudepigraphical device is therefore not a fraudulent means of claiming apostolic authority, but

²⁵ Baukham, 159.

²⁶ Baukham, 159.

²⁷ Baukham, 160.

²⁸ Baukham, 161.

embodies a claim to be a faithful mediator of the apostolic message... There is no reason why 2 Peter should not hold an honorable place in the canon of Scripture.”²⁹

The response to the testament theory is, first of all, that the early church was aware of much pseudo-Petrine literature and sifted through it and rejected it, but did not reject 2 Peter.³⁰ Indeed, “[e]vidence that early Christians accepted pseudepigraphic documents as authoritative is completely lacking.”³¹ According to L. R. Donelson: “No one ever seems to have accepted a document as religiously and philosophically prescriptive which was known to be forged. I do not know of a single example.”³² In addition, while “[r]esemblances between 2 Peter and the ‘testament’ form are undeniable... the use of this form within a letter renders comparison with other ‘testaments’ dubious.”³³ Ultimately, while we can recognize the testament genre, there are serious problems with it when applied to 2 Peter. Moo is correct to condemn it as a “have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too” theory that is out of accord with the practice of the early church:

The very fact that 2 Peter was accepted as a canonical book, then, presumes that the early Christians who made this decision were positive that Peter wrote it. Those who did not think Peter wrote it barred it from the canon for this reason. In other words, we have to choose between (1) viewing 2 Peter as a forgery, intended perhaps to claim an authority that the author did not really have—and therefore omit it from the canon; and (2) viewing 2 Peter as an authentic letter

²⁹ Baukham, 161-62.

³⁰ Schreiner, 264.

³¹ Schreiner, 270.

³² Moo, 23.

³³ Moo, 24.

of the apostle Peter. The 'have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too' theory of a canonical pseudepigraphon does not seem to be an alternative.³⁴

And in fact, the very argument used by the critics that the church was slow to accept 2 Peter into the canon actually argues in favor of Petrine authorship since "it shows that Christians of early times were not disposed to receive in haste every book which might profess to be inspired."³⁵

In the final analysis, the arguments against Petrine authorship are conjectural arguments that a single writer would never use somewhat different styles in different contexts, that 1 and 2 Peter are too different to have one author, or that a fisherman would not use Hellenistic terms, etc. Other claims, such as a total lack of reference to 2 Peter in the early church writings, are simply wrong. In favor of Peter is its acceptance into the canon over against rejected books that undeniably falsely claimed Petrine Authorship. And, in addition, there is strong internal evidence for Petrine authorship, including the claim in the first verse that Peter wrote the letter, reference to Jesus' prophecy of Peter's death (1:14), and reference to the transfiguration (1:16). While there is surely some evidence against Petrine authorship, the evidence is readily met by more plausible arguments upholding Petrine authorship, so that on the whole there are inadequate grounds for rejecting the authenticity of the epistle that is plainly asserted in its first verse.

³⁴ Moo, 23-24.

³⁵ Hovey, 76.

