

Covenant History Series
First Peter—Living in Light of Our Inheritance

Sunday, November 8, 2009

Introduction

The letter was written by **Peter**, who calls himself **an apostle of Jesus Christ** (1:1). Peter hardly needs any introduction to those who are familiar with the Bible. But I will say a few words about him anyway.

Author

Peter was one of Jesus' first disciples (Matt. 4:18-20). He was one of three (with James and John) whom Jesus included in an inner circle (Mk. 5:37; 9:2; 14:33). His original name was Simon (Matt. 10:2), but Jesus gave him the name Cephas. That's the Aramaic. The equivalent in Greek is *Petros* (Peter) (**Jn. 1:40-42**). Both Cephas and Peter mean "rock." He gave him this name "Rock" because it was upon Peter's ministry that he would build the church (**Matt. 16:18-19**).

Explain the concept of binding and loosing

Peter clearly had the preeminent place among the twelve, which is reflected in the fact that his name always appears first whenever the apostles are listed (Matt. 10:2-4; Mk. 3:16-19; Lk. 6:14-16; Acts 1:13).

We discover that Jesus made a special appearance to him after his resurrection (**1 Cor. 15:5**), and was given a special commission (**Jn. 21:15-19**).

At every major juncture in the progress of the gospel, Peter was *the* principal player. He was the first to preach the gospel to the Jews on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14f.), he was instrumental in bringing in the Samaritans (Acts 8:14), and he was the first to formally preach to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

Peter clearly has a very distinguished place.

From Acts 13 on, however, he begins to fade into the background of the Scriptural narrative of the church, and the labors of the apostle Paul begin to move onto center stage. We see little else of him in the remainder of the New Testament, except in his two short epistles, and a few scattered references to him.¹

The early church father, Papias (c. 60-c. 130), stated that Mark was an interpreter of Peter and wrote his Gospel at Peter's instruction.² If this is true, we might regard Mark's Gospel as the Gospel According to Peter. The Scriptures do seem to indicate a close relationship between Peter and Mark (1 Pet. 5:13; cf. Acts 12:12).

Peter made use of Silvanus as his amanuensis in writing the first epistle that bears his name (1 Pet. 5:12). This is probably the same man named "Silas" who traveled for a time with the apostle Paul (Acts

¹ Acts 15:7-11, 14; 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Gal. 1:18; 2:7-9, 11-21.

² Papias actually quotes a "Presbyter John," "Mark being the interpreter of Peter, whatsoever he recorded he wrote with great accuracy, but not however, in the order in which it was spoken or done by our Lord, for he neither heard nor followed our Lord, but as before said, he was in company with Peter, who gave him such instruction as was necessary, but not to give a history of our Lord's discourses: wherefore Mark has not erred in any thing, by writing some things as he has recorded them; for he was carefully attentive to one thing, not to pass by any thing that he heard, or to state any thing falsely in these accounts" (cited by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15). Irenaeus also states, "Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter" (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1).

15:22, 32-34, 40; 16:19-29; 17:4-15; 18:5; 2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1).

Recipients

The letter is addressed to **those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia** (1:2). These regions make up much of what is now known as Turkey.



Founding of the Churches

We learn that the apostle Paul was the first to take the gospel to the region of Galatia, which occurred during his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). We learn also of his going to the city of Ephesus, in Asia, and spending a considerable time preaching the gospel there (Acts 18:19-21; 19:1-20:1). However, it is not known who first preached

the gospel in the regions Pontus, Cappadocia, and Bithynia or when; but Acts tells us that on the day of Pentecost,

There were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven...Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians (Acts 2:5, 9-11)

If there were any from these regions who were converted to Christ, as undoubtedly there were, they would naturally have been the first to take the message of the gospel with them back to their own communities.

Why would Peter address a letter specifically to those living in these areas? It is not likely that he had himself been to the region and personally knew the believers there. He seems to have spent his time ministering in "Judea and Galilee and Samaria...and all those parts" (Acts 9:31-32). Perhaps the churches in the region, not being established by the ministry of an apostle, lacked apostolic oversight, and Peter's pastoral concern moved him to write in order to strengthen and encourage them (cf. Jn. 21:15-17). This may especially have been the case if the first converts to the faith had been those who received the gospel from him on the day of Pentecost, and had in turn taken it back with them to their respective communities. He may have learned of their condition through the reports of messengers and Christian travelers to and from the region.

The Character of the Churches

It appears from the language of the letter that although the first from these regions to believe the gospel were Jews, the majority of those to whom he is writing are from a Gentile background (**1:18; 4:3-5**).

It's interesting that although the audience seems to be largely from a Gentile background, Peter uses language of them that is used of Israel in the Old Testament. We have seen this before with Paul. Believing Gentiles, Christian Gentiles, are conceived of as being grafted into the faithful remnant in Israel.

1:1, "...elect exiles of the dispersion..." (The *Diaspora* refers to the Jews who lived outside the land of Israel)

1:16, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (From Lev. 11:44)

2:9, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (From Ex. 19:6)

2:12, "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable..."

Though there were some cities of regional significance in the areas mentioned, there were no cities of Empire-wide significance, except in Asia. The area has been called the "backwoods" of the Empire.³

Place and Date of Writing

Tradition fixes the time and place of the apostle's death at Rome during the Neronian persecution (A.D. 64-68), and the writing of this epistle from the same city just prior to his martyrdom. However, the evidence for his writing the letter from Rome is tenuous, at best.

Peter wrote from a city he referred to as "Babylon." The question is this, "Does he use the name literally, or metaphorically?" If literally, it's a reference to Babylon in Mesopotamia. There had been a

³ Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), p. 8.

significant Jewish population in Babylon ever since 586 B.C., when the Jews were taken there in exile after the fall of Jerusalem. Babylon was an important center of Jewish life and scholarship well into the Christian era. (For example, consider the fact that even to this day the Babylonian Talmud is given more weight than the Jerusalem Talmud).

If Peter is using the name Babylon metaphorically, which is how most interpreters understand it, then the two most likely candidates are Rome and Jerusalem.

Many commentators think Peter uses "Babylon" as a symbolic name for Rome. They do so largely upon the assumption that the Babylon mentioned in Revelation⁴ is a cryptic name for the imperial city. However, it seems quite clear to me that in Revelation Babylon refers, not to Rome, but to Jerusalem. In Revelation, Babylon is three times called "the great city" (Rev. 16:19; 17:18; 18:10), which is also how Jerusalem is identified in the book (Rev. 11:8).⁵ Thus, if Peter, like John, labels Jerusalem "Babylon," then he wrote from the Jewish capital, probably just before the outbreak of the war with Rome (A.D. 66-70).

Peter's Use of the Old Testament

All of the writers of the New Testament make very liberal use of the Old Testament, but few do so as prolifically as Peter does in this epistle. Direct quotations of, and allusions to, the Old Testament abound, showing that he lived and breathed the writings of Moses and the Prophets.

⁴ Rev. 14:8; 16:29; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21.

⁵ In Revelation, Jerusalem, the "great city," is called by three cryptic names: Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon, noted for their immorality, persecution of the people of God, and false religion, respectively.

*Citations of OT Passages*⁶

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| 1 Pet. 1:16 | Lev. 19:2; Lev. 11:44; 20:7, 26 |
| 1 Pet. 1:24-25 | Isa. 40:6-8 |
| 1 Pet. 2:6 | Isa. 28:16 |
| 1 Pet. 2:7 | Ps. 118:22 |
| 1 Pet. 2:8 | Isa. 8:14 |
| 1 Pet. 2:9 | Isa. 43:20; Ex. 19:6; Isa. 43:21 |
| 1 Pet. 3:10-12 | Ps. 34:12-16 |
| 1 Pet. 4:18 | Prov. 11:31 |
| 1 Pet. 5:5 | Prov. 3:34 |

Allusions to OT passages:

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|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 Pet. 1:17 | Ps.89:26; Jer. 3:19 |
| 1 Pet. 1:18 | Isa. 52:3 |
| 1 Pet. 1:23 | Dan. 6:26 (?) |
| 1 Pet. 2:3 | Ps. 34:8 (33:9 LXX) |
| 1 Pet. 2:10 | Hos. 1:6, 9; 2:25 |
| 1 Pet. 2:11 | Ps. 39:12 (cf. Gen. 23:4) |
| 1 Pet. 2:12 | Isa. 10:3 |
| 1 Pet. 2:17 | Prov. 24:21 |
| 1 Pet. 2:22 | Isa. 53:9 |
| 1 Pet. 2:24 | Isa. 53:4-5, 12 |
| 1 Pet. 2:25 | Isa. 53:6 |
| 1 Pet. 3:6 | Gen. 18:12 (Prov. 3:25) |
| 1 Pet. 3:13 | Isa. 50:9 |
| 1 Pet. 3:14-15 | Isa. 8:12-13 |
| 1 Pet. 3:20 | Gen. 7:13, 17, 23 |
| 1 Pet. 4:8 | Prov. 10:12 |
| 1 Pet. 4:14 | Ps. 89:50-51 (88:51 LXX); Isa. 11:2 |
| 1 Pet. 4:17 | Jer. 25:29; Ezek. 9:6 |

⁶ This table is taken from Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (NICNT), p. 24.

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| 1 Pet. 5:7 | Ps. 55:23 |
| 1 Pet. 5:8 | Ps. 22:14 |

Peter's Purpose for Writing

A close reading of the letter reveals that Peter is addressing a persecuted people, and that it is his aim to steel their nerve, to strengthen and encourage them to endure suffering for the name of Jesus Christ. The references to suffering—those of Christ, as well as of the saints—are many (1:11; 2:19, 20, 21, 23; 3:14, 17, 18; 4:1, 13, 15, 19; 5:1, 9, 10).

He encourages them by reminding them of the great inheritance they have reserved in heaven for them. I have included an outline of the book in the bulletin that I think captures the main themes of the book. After a brief epistolary introduction in 1:1-2, we find Peter speaking in glowing terms about the Christian's great inheritance (1:3-12). Then, the main body of the letter is occupied with an exhortation to live in the light of our inheritance.

The emphasis here seems to be this: Since we have such great and precious promises in the gospel concerning our eternal inheritance let us live faithfully now (even though we may suffer for it) in order that we may gain an eternal reward.

I used this example just the other day with my children in our family devotions. I said, "Suppose I give you a hundred dollars today and tell you that you may spend it to buy whatever you want right now, or you can keep it for a year without spending it and I'll give you \$1,000 a year from now. What would you do? Would you forego present pleasure for future reward? Or would you forego future reward for present pleasure?"

This is how it is with the Christian life. And this is how Peter is encouraging his readers. In essence, he's saying, "Look, I know the suffering and affliction for Jesus' sake is hard; and you're tempted to give up, to throw in the towel. But don't do it! The reward is too great to lose! You would be throwing away a marvelous inheritance."

This is how he starts his epistle, by speaking of the greatness of our inheritance.

1:3-12 (read and comment)

Then he says, "Now in light of this, be faithful! And here's what faithfulness looks like." And as we read we will notice that the accent is frequently on trials and afflictions for the sake of Christ.

As I have said before—and it's not original with me, I heard Steve Schlissel put it his—Satan's chief objective is remove God's people from the Word; and if he can't remove them from the Word, he seeks to remove them from the world.

This is a mark of wisdom, not living in light of the present, but living in light of the future.

Outline

First Peter may be outlined as follows:

- I. Address and salutation, **1:1-2**
- II. The Christian's Great Inheritance, **1:3-12**
- III. Living in Light of our Inheritance, **1:13-5:11**
 - A. General exhortations to holy living 1:13-21
 - B. Love of the Brethren 1:22-2:10
 1. Loving one another from the heart (1:22-25)
 2. Putting aside unloving practices (2:1-3)
 3. Christian identity and the consequences of unbelief (2:4-10)
 - C. Keeping our behavior excellent among the Gentiles 2:11-3:12
 1. Submission to civil authority (2:13-17)
 2. Submission of slaves to their masters (2:18-25)
 3. Submission of wives to their husbands (3:1-6)
 4. Husbands' treatment of their wives (3:7)
 5. Seeking peace and pursuing it (3:8-12)
 - D. Response to suffering persecution 3:13-4:19
 1. Keeping a good conscience in suffering (3:13-17)
 2. The example of Christ (3:18-22)
 3. Persecutors shall have to give an account to God (4:1-6)
 4. Further exhortation to love one another (4:7-11)
 5. Rejoice in persecution (4:12-19)
 - E. Exhortation to the elders of the church 5:1-4
 - F. Miscellaneous exhortations 5:5-10
 1. Submission of young men to elders and showing humility toward others (5:5-7)
 2. Contending against the devil (5:8-9)
 3. Promise of strength during suffering (5:10)
 4. Doxology (5:11)
- IV. Concluding paragraph, **5:12-14**