

The Historical Context of 1 Peter **by Dan Fabricatore**

The epistle of 1 Peter provides several internal clues regarding its historical context, including its author, destination, and its recipients.

Author

Petrine authorship is proclaimed in the first verse of this short epistle when the author writes, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Patristic evidence is in overwhelming support that the author of this epistle is none other than Simon Peter, the disciple of the Lord (Guthrie, 771-774). The fathers wrote of the epistle as containing apostolic authority.

There have been attempts to reject Petrine authorship of the epistle along literary and historical lines (i.e. F. W. Beare), but Guthrie and others have shown that these arguments are weak. Linguistically it is argued that the Greek of 1 Peter is very polished, being more superior to the writings of even the highly trained Paul. However this in itself cannot rule out the fisherman who would have been proficient in Aramaic and literate in Greek. The observation in Acts 4:13 that Peter was “uneducated and untrained” need not imply that he was incompetent as an author (cf. Blum, *Expositors Bible Commentary*, who argues that the term in Acts 4:13 ἀγράμματος only meant “unable to write” in early Greek). Their response to his teaching (“they were marveling”) actually is a powerful witness that though untrained, he spoke with power. In addition, his employing of Silvanus as his amanuensis (5:12) may account for such a smooth style (cf. Guthrie, 778-781). Other arguments that Peter’s command of the LXX is too proficient for such a man is equally weak. As a Jew he would have been exposed to the LXX and given the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiration, his use of it need not surprise us.

Historically it is argued that official Roman persecutions had not yet spread to Asia Minor. Therefore the epistle could not have been written by Peter because the persecutions that spread to Asia Minor were later, under the Domitianic and Trajanic reigns, thereby ruling out Peter who by then would have been dead. However Peter may have been writing from Rome (“Babylon,” 5:13; cryptic designation for Rome in NT), and his knowledge of the Neronian persecutions in that great city is likely the basis for his writing to warn his readers of an escalation in persecution.

Date

The authorship of 1 Peter does play a role in dating the epistle. If Peter is the author and if he was martyred under Nero then a date of AD 64 is most likely the latest the epistle could have been written. In addition, as many point out, the exhortation to civil obedience to the state in 2:13-17 makes little sense if Nero’s blood-bath is under way (Guthrie, 796). This observation may not be convincing to everyone since some might argue that Peter might have given such an exhortation regardless of the political climate.

Recipients and Destination

The epistle itself claims to have been written to believers living throughout various regions of Asia Minor, namely “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1:1). The fact that they are believers is seen in the first verse with the reference to the expression “who are chosen.” Jewish believers would have taken comfort in the fact that they were the people of God in the midst of such persecution as the book goes on to address.

The term “scattered” (NASB) in 1:1 is from the Greek term **διασπορά**. This term, used about a dozen times in the LXX to refer to the scattering of Jews because of divine judgment, came to be used as a somewhat technical description for any Jews living outside of the homeland (cf. James 1:1). Peter’s recipients are Jewish Christians who either were saved and then scattered into this area, or perhaps better, Jews already living in the area who were saved through gospel preaching.

The rich flavor of Old Testament allusions and quotes leads many scholars to conclude that the recipients were solely Jewish Christians. It is very likely however, that in the regions of Asia Minor, churches would have included Gentile believers as well. Michaels argues that Peter, writing over a great distance to such a large geographic audience, may not have been thoroughly informed as to the makeup of the various local churches. He believes that in fact the churches would have predominately Gentile (xlv, xlvi). Outside of the Jerusalem church early in Acts, one wonders if by this time any local church could be exclusively Jewish. The argument that Peter is simply writing to Jewish believers who happen to be worshipping in mixed churches loses steam when one considers that in chapter 5 Peter is giving instruction to the church regarding elders. Passages such as 1:14 and 1:18 do seem to argue for lives that before Christ were purely pagan. cf. also 4:3-5. Possibly we see the genius of Peter in that he can address both Jew and Gentile believers.

Conclusion

Simon Peter, the apostle of Jesus Christ, is the author of this epistle. He is writing to believers who are living outside of Israel, in the regions of Asia Minor. He writes with a particular “Jewish flavor,” yet it must be assumed that many in those churches must have included Gentile believers as well. He most likely is writing about AD 64, around the time of the vicious Neronian persecution in Rome, and he writes to warn believers to live holy lives even in the midst of an impending escalation of persecution.