

The Literary Context of 1 Peter by Dan Fabricatore

1 Peter is by literary form, an epistle (cf. 2 Peter 3:1), written in the classical manner of such forms known in the New Testament world. It contains an opening greeting (1:1-2), a main body (1:3-5:11), and a conclusion (5:12-14). There are several interesting literary devices found in the letter itself.

Old Testament Scripture

Peter quotes directly from the LXX in this letter on several occasions by using some introductory formula. In 1:16 he quotes from Lev. 19:2 and introduces the quote with the expression, “because it is written.” In 1:24-25 he quotes from Isa. 40:6-8 and introduces this quote with the expression, “For.” The quote in 2:6 is introduced by the phrase, “For this is contained in Scripture” while 3:10-12 quoted from Ps. 33 [34]:13-17 is introduced with the wording, “For.” Several other quotes from the Old Testament are simply inserted without any introductory formula (2:7,8; 2:22; 3:14; 4:18; 5:5b).

New Testament References

There is some debate over the extent of the use of Gospel tradition and Acts in 1 Peter. Such a debate is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are a few interesting examples that can be noted.

There are several themes from the Sermon on the Mount found in 1 Peter. They include 1 Peter 2:12 (Matt. 5:16); 2:19-20 (Luke 6:32-34); 3:14a (Luke 6:22); 4:14a (Matt. 5:11) and others as well. Peter does not only allude to teaching found in the Synoptics, but John as well. His teaching in 1:3, 22 on being born-again is reminiscent of John 3:3. In addition, his exhortation to “shepherd the flock of God” in 5:2 uses the same verb as Christ’s address to Peter in John 21:16.

In addition, many have observed similarity between Peter’s sermons in Acts and parts of this first epistle (cf. 1 Peter 1:20 with Acts 2:23; 4:5 with Acts 10:42; 2:7-8 with Acts 4:10-11). In each passage Psalm 118:22 is quoted and attributed to Christ. This is in line with Peter’s emphasis on Christology that is manifested in the epistle.

There are also many affinities between First Peter and various New Testament epistles, such as Romans, James and Hebrews (cf. Kelly, 11,12). However one must realize that New Testament writers are writing about many of the same things (i.e. Salvation, Christ, godliness, Old Testament fulfillment, etc...). Therefore one should find such similarities and we must not assume that Peter is dependent on them all.

Forms

Many scholars believe that the epistle contains various rhetorical and hymnic forms including household duty codes (2:8-3:7), and a doxology in 4:11. However the extensive forms often seen by scholars is debatable (cf. Michaels, xlii-xliii).

When seen as a unit, many believe that the epistle was originally used as a sermon or general address. This shouldn't be too surprising since the reputation of Peter in Acts is on his preaching. Whatever was the genesis for the epistle, it seems most likely that it was ultimately penned and sent for the purpose of being read by various local churches (1:1).

Purpose

Peter's own purpose statement is given in 5:12 when he states that he has written for the purpose of "exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God." First Peter is hortatory in purpose, yet it contains several theological treatises. It is hortatory in that it exhorts believers how to live (holy lives) and what example to follow (Christ). Christ lived a holy life even in the midst of unjust suffering, and we are called to do likewise.

Theological

Peter deals at length with God's gracious provision of salvation (1:3-12) as well as the believer's responsibility to be sanctified (1:13-16). It is his Christology, however, that dominates the letter. Christ has set the example of dealing with unjust suffering (2:21-25), provided redemption with His own precious blood (1:18-21; 3:18), rose from the dead (3:21), ascended into heaven (3:22), and is coming again to judge the world (1:7, 13; 2:12; 5:4). He is also head of believers, being "the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls" (2:25) and the "Chief Shepherd" of His body, the church (5:4).

Message

First Peter calls on the people of God to worship God for providing such a gracious salvation and to live holy lives even in the midst of unjust suffering while at the same time maintaining proper relationships both in the home and in the assembly.

Conclusion

Peter writes as a man who had spent time with the Lord Jesus, making allusion to His teaching from the Gospels. He also writes from the perspective of man who was heavily involved in the founding of the church in Acts. His message is pastoral in tone, containing both ethical injunctions combined with great theological truth, with an emphasis being on the precious Lamb of God and His redemptive work for sinners.