

# SECOND EPISTLE OF PETER

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**Approximate date:** 65 to 68 C.E.

**Time period:** spread of false teaching in the community of faith, and degrees of impatience about the Second Coming

**Author:** the Apostle Peter (possibly with a scribe's assistance, and/or posthumously released)

**Location of author:** Rome

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers who are soon to face the absence of Peter, the same basic audience as 1 Peter

**People:**

Peter, Paul

**People mentioned:**

Yeshua the Messiah, Noah, Lot, Baalam

**Places mentioned:**

Sodom and Gomorrah

**Key Themes:**

the certainty of Yeshua's return / the coming of false prophets and teachers / people denying the Lord / the judgment upon the ungodly (substantiated by Tanach examples) / people mocking the return of the Lord / the Day of the LORD

**Key Scriptures:** 2 Peter 1:3; 2:1; 3:3-4, 10-11 / **Greeting** (1:1-2); **True Knowledge** (1:3-21); **False Knowledge** (2:1-22); **The Present Challenge** (3:1-18)<sup>1</sup>

**Theological Summary:** The author of the Epistle of 2 Peter identifies himself in the text as the Apostle Peter (1:1), and states how this is his second letter: "This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder" (3:1). The author makes the claim to be an eyewitness of the Transfiguration of Yeshua (1:16-18), and indicates that he has a strong acquaintanceship with Paul (3:15). The author of 2 Peter indicates that his death is soon to occur (1:12-15), and 2 Peter is often classified within the farewell discourses of other known Biblical figures, including: Jacob (Genesis 49), Moses (Deuteronomy 31-33), Yeshua (Matthew 24-25; John 14-16), and Paul

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 855-857.

(Acts 20:17-38; 2 Timothy).<sup>2</sup> According to early Christian tradition, the Apostle Peter was martyred in Rome at the hands of Nero (*1 Clement* 5:3; cf. Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.5). Following Peter's death, this letter anticipates that a variety of severe problems are going to significantly face the community of Believers.

While the Epistle of 2 Peter has certainly been valued to various degrees by today's Bible readers, few are often aware of how this letter has a number of difficult questions surrounding its purpose and composition. Many conservatives accept genuine Petrine authorship of 2 Peter, whereas all liberal theologians deny it. Moderates are somewhere in the middle of the liberal-conservative paradigm, often thinking that 2 Peter was written in the name of Peter, sometime immediately following his death, and/or possibly having been in the process of composition before Peter's death.

Liberals often argue against Petrine authorship of 2 Peter, because there is no clear tradition regarding its composition, and the fact that 2 Peter was the last text to be accepted into the New Testament canon.<sup>3</sup> The Greek construction of the epistle is thought to bear no influence to someone from Judea.<sup>4</sup> The recognition of Paul's letter's bearing authority for the Body of Messiah (3:15) is believed by liberals to be a reflection from a later time after both Paul and Peter's death. 2 Peter is thought to have parallels in composition style that are closer to late First and early Second Century Christian works like *1&2 Clement* or the *Shepherd of Hermas*, with 2 Peter originating within the Roman Christian community of the late First or early Second Centuries C.E.<sup>5</sup> While liberals all agree that 2 Peter is from a later period, after the Apostle Peter's death, they are not agreed as to whether or not the epistle was composed to address the developed Gnosticism of the early-to-mid Second Century.<sup>6</sup> Other liberals have posited a time period for 2 Peter's composition immediately after the death of the Apostolic generation, particularly in terms of a growing dispatience over when the Messiah would return.<sup>7</sup> Even though genuine Petrine authorship of 2 Peter is denied, classical liberals do not discount the text as being valuable. The *ABD* entry summarizes, "It records the effort of Christianity in a transitional post-apostolic period to communicate effectively in a pluralistic cultural environment while at the same time remaining faithful to its apostolic heritage and underlying worldview."<sup>8</sup>

Why would some expositors be led to think that the Epistle of 2 Peter is pseudepigraphal, meaning that the Apostle Peter himself was not responsible for its composition? Much of the discussion over 2 Peter's authorship concerns its common classification of being Jewish apocalyptic literature. Bauckham indicates how "The problem of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. J.R. Michaels, "Peter, Second Epistle of," in *ISBE*, 3:816; R. Bauckham, "2 Peter," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments*, pp 923-924; Carroll D. Osburn, "Peter, Second Letter of," in *EDB*, 1039.

<sup>3</sup> J.C. Beker, "Peter, Second Letter of," in *IDB*, 3:768; John H. Elliot, "Peter, Second Epistle of," in *ABD*, 5:283; cf. Michaels, "Peter, Second Epistle of," in *ISBE*, 3:815.

<sup>4</sup> Beker, "Peter, Second Letter of," in *IDB*, 3:768; Bauckham, "2 Peter," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments*, 924.

<sup>5</sup> Elliot, "Peter, Second Epistle of," in *ABD*, 5:287; Osburn, "Peter, Second Letter of," in *EDB*, 1039.

<sup>6</sup> Beker, "Peter, Second Letter of," in *IDB*, 3:768; Against: Osburn, "Peter, Second Letter of," in *EDB*, 1040.

<sup>7</sup> Osburn, "Peter, Second Letter of," in *EDB*, 1040.

<sup>8</sup> Elliot, "Peter, Second Epistle of," in *ABD*, 5:283.

the authorship of 2 Peter arises in part out of the form and structure. In the Jewish literature of this period, testaments were pseudepigraphal. They were attributed to OT figures long dead...This establishes an initial presumption that 2 Peter is likewise a work written in Peter's name by someone else after his death, though it remains possible that the testament genre could have been used by Peter to write his own, real testament."<sup>9</sup> For a piece like 2 Peter, Bauckham concludes that the letter was written in the name of the Apostle, including some fiction. Bauckham thinks that 2 Peter was written by a leader in the Roman assembly about a generation after the Apostle's death, probably to stop some problems he saw arise: "That the author chose to write Peter's testament is probably best explained if he was a leader in the Roman church...which had counted Peter as the most prestigious of its leaders in the previous generation."<sup>10</sup> Such a proposition, in dating the Epistle of 2 Peter to the late First Century C.E., does at least allow for the possibility of some genuine Petrine concepts (oral teachings passed from Peter to the Roman Believers), to be included in its instruction.

Is 2 Peter a genuine work of the Apostle? Who were the original recipients of 2 Peter? What were their circumstances and the false teachers/teachings they needed to beware of?

Conservative theologians tend to accept genuine Petrine authorship of 2 Peter, for a variety of important reasons. There do exist some possible allusions to 2 Peter by the late First Century:

Noah preached repentance, and as many as listened to him were saved (*1 Clement* 7:6; cf. 2 Peter 2:5).<sup>11</sup>

But ye know that the day of judgment even now "cometh as a burning oven," and some "of the heavens shall melt," and all the earth shall be as lead melting on the fire, and then the hidden and open works of men shall appear (*2 Clement* 16:3; cf. 2 Peter 3:10).<sup>12</sup>

2 Peter is not quoted specifically by name until Origen used it in the mid-Third Century.<sup>13</sup> The Fourth Century Christian historian Eusebius noted how 2 Peter was "Among the disputed books, although they are known and approved by many" (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.3). Total acceptance of 2 Peter within the canon did take some time, but this did not mean it was treated as spurious or questionable or quasi-heretical. "Essentially the Church up to A.D. 200 is silent about 2 Peter. The Epistle was not attacked; it was simply ignored and seems to have remained virtually unknown until the time of Origen" (Michaels, *ISBE*).<sup>14</sup> Does the infrequent use of 2 Peter point to the text being a pseudepigraphal work? Guthrie notes how "[Eusebius] makes it clear that the majority accepted the epistle as authentic, together with James and

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<sup>9</sup> Bauckham, "2 Peter," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments*, 924.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 925.

<sup>11</sup> [BibleWorks 8.0: Schaff, Early Church Fathers.](#)

<sup>12</sup> [BibleWorks 8.0: Ante-Nicene Fathers.](#)

<sup>13</sup> Michaels, "Peter, Second Epistle of," in *ISBE*; 3:815-816; Elliot, "Peter, Second Epistle of," in *ABD*, 5:283.

<sup>14</sup> Michaels, "Peter, Second Epistle of," in *ISBE*, 3:816.

Jude, but he himself had doubts about it.”<sup>15</sup> But why would anyone have doubts about the Epistle of 2 Peter?

Gundry explains that “The early church exhibited some hesitancy in accepting [2 Peter] into the canon. This hesitancy can be explained by the comparative brevity of the epistle, however; and such brevity may have curtailed its distribution and limited people’s acquaintance with it.”<sup>16</sup> A strong possibility surrounding why the Epistle of 2 Peter was viewed with skepticism by the Second-Third Century Christian Church, likely had to do with the use of Peter’s name in various pseudepigraphal works by Gnostics. Without a wide amount of circulation, and with a text purporting to be from the Apostle Peter, “If Gnostic groups had used Peter’s name to drive home their own particular tenets, this fact would cause the orthodox church to take particular care not to use any spurious Petrine epistles. Some of the more nervous probably regarded 2 Peter suspiciously for this reason, but the fact that it ultimately gained acceptance in spite of the pseudo-Petrine literature is an evidence more favourable to its authenticity than against it” (Guthrie).<sup>17</sup> Carson and Moo further also concur, “The very fact that 2 Peter was accepted as a canonical book, then, presumes that the early Christians who made this decision were sure that Peter wrote it.”<sup>18</sup> The Christian Church of the Third Century C.E. did finally accept 2 Peter as canonical. Most especially to be noted is how “The writer of 2 Peter says nothing which the apostolic writers of the other books of the New Testament would not have endorsed. There is no hint of esoteric doctrine or practice” (Guthrie).<sup>19</sup>

That the Epistle of 2 Peter has some kind of relationship, with the Epistle of Jude (compare 2 Peter 3:3 and Jude 17-18), is recognized by both conservatives and liberals alike. There is no theological agreement by either, though, as to which text was written first.<sup>20</sup> Would an author be more likely to expand a piece, or contract it? Some think that 2 Peter and Jude were written at around the same time, with Jude following 2 Peter. Carson and Moo describe, “Peter, having written a letter castigating false teachers in a specific community, shared its contents with Jude. Jude then borrowed freely those portions of 2 Peter that were relevant to a similar false teaching that he was dealing with in his community.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, if the Epistle of 2 Peter was a genuine composition of the Apostle Peter, produced at the end of his life in the late 60s C.E., the Epistle of Jude could have been a late First Century C.E. indication that much of what was anticipated by Peter had been realized.

It is attested in 1 Peter 5:12 that Silvanus/Silas served as Peter’s secretary for composing his first epistle, and 2 Peter 3:1 says that the Epistle of 2 Peter is the second time of the Apostle’s writing. No amanuensis is named for the composition of 2 Peter, although it does seem likely that one was employed if 2 Peter is a kind of final testimony delivered by the Apostle. Genuine Petrine authorship assumes that the letter was written between 65 to 68

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<sup>15</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 808.

<sup>16</sup> Gundry, “The Catholic, or General, Epistles,” in *A Survey of the New Testament*, 443.

<sup>17</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 809.

<sup>18</sup> Carson and Moo, 663.

<sup>19</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 839.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Elliot, “Peter, Second Epistle of,” in *ABD*, 3:284; Carson and Moo, pp 655-657.

<sup>21</sup> Carson and Moo, 657.

C.E., (immediately) prior to Peter's death.<sup>22</sup> If so, then given the widespread ancient testimony of Peter being martyred from Rome, a Roman composition of 2 Peter seems to be required. 2 Peter 3:1, "this is now my second letter to you" (NIV), also seems to imply that the same basic audience which received 1 Peter probably also received this letter, perhaps as a kind of addendum.

When approaching the composition of 2 Peter from the perspective that the material genuinely originated from the Apostle Peter, the genre of the letter as a final testimony does need to be kept in mind. "2 Peter presents itself as Peter's *testament*...It is a farewell discourse of one who is about to die" (Michaels, *ISBE*).<sup>23</sup> When we see a statement like, "...at any time after my departure you will be able to call these things to mind" (1:15), it should not be surprising why some conservatives think that 2 Peter was completed immediately after Peter's death. "It is possible that 2 Peter may represent a compendium or anthology of traditional Petrine material put together in the form of a testament by one or more of the apostle's followers after his death. Posthumous publication in Peter's name does not necessarily imply any intent to deceive" (Michaels, *ISBE*).<sup>24</sup> The material of 2 Peter could actually have been in the process of being written in the final days of the Apostle (1:13, 15), but then completed after his death. A posthumous composition or release of 2 Peter, making the material genuinely Petrine, should be considered preferable to a pseudepigrapher from a generation or two later composing a letter in the name of Peter, long after his death.

No one in the academic community, liberal *or* conservative, has ever suggested that 2 Peter was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic. In fact, 2 Peter is not included in the Aramaic Peshitta and is not considered canonical by the Syrian Orthodox Church. 2 Peter does employ some Greek-specific philosophical terms,<sup>25</sup> and the text demonstrates a familiarity on the author's part with a broad Jewish and Greek audience. A Greek linguistic origin for 2 Peter should not, however, discount the strong reliance that the message of the epistle has rooted within the Tanach Scriptures.

The theology of 2 Peter may be easily divided between its three chapters. The three-fold purpose of the epistle is to encourage Believers in their spiritual growth (ch. 1), combat false teachers and their teachings (ch. 2), and encourage people to be on guard in relation to Yeshua's return (ch. 3). The text most certainly reflects on Peter's impending death.

Some have thought that the false teachers mentioned (2:1-3) are some kind of Gnostics, but others think that the descriptions seen are general enough that proto- or incipient-Gnosticism, or any form of Gnosticism, need not be implied.<sup>26</sup> Other proposals for the false teaching confronted in 2 Peter include an opposition to Epicureanism, as "The Epicureans were known especially for their denial of providence, the afterlife, or any kind of divine judgment—just the view that seems to be taken by the false teachers according to chapter 3" (Carson and Moo).<sup>27</sup> Carson and Moo further direct us, though, "our very quest to identify [the

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<sup>22</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 844.

<sup>23</sup> Michaels, "Peter, Second Epistle of," in *ISBE*, 3:816.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:818.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:817.

<sup>26</sup> Bauckham, "2 Peter," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments*, 925.

<sup>27</sup> Carson and Moo, 658.

false teachers] with a particular group may be misguided. People in the ancient world, as in our day, were bombarded by viewpoints and ideas from many different perspectives...The false teachers, in other words, may have been influenced by both the broad philosophical climate of Epicureanism and by incipient Gnosticism—and by other movements as well.”<sup>28</sup> No reader of 2 Peter can deny the strong reliance seen on the Tanach, especially as “we find a long description and denunciation, using Old Testament illustrations and imagery, of the false teachers” (Carson and Moo).<sup>29</sup>

One of the most controversial parts of 2 Peter undeniably concerns the teaching seen on the end-times. In the Last Days, there will be people who mock the idea of the Second Coming of Yeshua (3:4). Part of recognizing the eternity and sovereignty of God is how “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day” (3:8; cf. Psalm 90:4). Some have used this passage as a support for the so-called 6,000 year doctrine,<sup>30</sup> where humanity has been given six millennia of time until the return of the Messiah for a thousand-year “Sabbath” reign. Elsewhere, though, it is implied that the righteous behavior of the saints is what is to hasten the return of the Lord (3:11-12).<sup>31</sup> Understanding these verses, in proper context, is a challenge for both evangelical Christians and Messianic Believers, many of whom may think that the end-times can somehow be “calculated.”

In terms of day-to-day living, the Epistle of 2 Peter does not present any challenges for Torah observant Messianics. But, 2 Peter does include many warnings that our Messianic faith community must especially heed. The background of 2 Peter largely confronts false teachers as deserving of nothing less than eternal punishment. 2 Peter includes a strong warning for those living in the Last Days, and it reflects the reality that people will fall away from the faith. As we steadily approach the return of Yeshua, Messianic approaches toward 2 Peter must keep this in mind as we try to police ourselves of any false theologies—perhaps including errant end-time predictions—that may enter into the camp.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp 658-659.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 654.

<sup>30</sup> Consult the FAQ, “6,000 Year Teaching.”

<sup>31</sup> Consult the author’s article “The Hastening of Righteousness” (appearing in *When Will the Messiah Return?*).

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 2 PETER:

- 1. Why do you think Peter is so candid against false prophets and teachers? Consider the examples he gives from the Tanach.**
- 2. How do you think any of Peter's warnings are given in respect to the end-times and return of Yeshua?**
- 3. Do you see any present application of Peter's warnings today for either mainstream Christianity *or* the Messianic movement?**

## REFLECTION ON 2 PETER'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Epistle of 2 Peter:*