
FIRST EPISTLE OF PETER

Approximate date: 64-67 C.E.

Time Period: immediately prior to the Jewish rebellion in Judea, possibly during the persecution by Emperor Nero

Author: the Apostle Peter, assisted by Silvanus

Location of author: Rome

Target audience and their location: Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia (Northwestern Asia Minor)

People:

Peter, Silvanus, Mark, Believers in the Diaspora

People mentioned:

Yeshua the Messiah, Sarah, Abraham, Noah

Places:

Jerusalem, Rome, regions of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia (Asia Minor), Bithynia, "Babylon"

Key Themes:

living as sojourners in a sinful world / enduring through persecution and remembering the great salvation to come / living a life of holiness and proper conduct before God / remembering oneself as a part of God's holy people / submitting oneself to temporal powers / proper relations between husband and wife / proper place of elders and servants in the Body of Messiah

Key Scriptures: 1 Peter 1:7; 4:16 / **Greetings** (1:1-2); **Nature of Salvation** (1:3-2:10); **Relationships Pertaining to Believers** (2:11-3:12); **Suffering and Service by Believers** (3:13-4:19); **Discipline by Believers** (5:1-11); **Conclusion** (5:12-14)¹

Theological Summary: The author of the Epistle of 1 Peter identifies himself as the Apostle Peter (1:1). He further says, "I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Messiah" (5:1), which has been taken in terms of the author being personally present during the time of Yeshua's trial and execution. From the contents of the

¹ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 800-804.

letter, and the personal character we see of Peter in the Gospels and Acts,² it is widely regarded as bearing all the necessary signs of being genuinely Petrine. Within the early Body of Messiah, Peter was widely considered to be the most prominent of the original Twelve Disciples, whose influence on the assembly was second only to James the Just. Peter is the first to verbalize to Yeshua that He is the Messiah, and Yeshua in turn tells Peter that He will give His Disciples the authority to bind and loose, prohibit and permit (Matthew 16:17-19). In the lists of the Twelve Disciples in the Apostolic Scriptures, Peter's name always appears first (Mark 3:16-19; Matthew 10:2-4; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13). It is Peter who preaches to the masses gathered at *Shavuot*/Pentecost in Acts ch. 2 when the Holy Spirit is poured out, and it is he who goes to the centurion Cornelius, the first non-Jewish person specifically recorded to have received the good news (Acts 10). Peter had a special calling from God to go with the good news to "the circumcised" (Galatians 2:7) or the Jewish people, and he was a dominant figure at the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15.

Genuine Petrine authorship of 1 Peter is accepted by conservative theologians, and it was recognized as such in Christian works from the Second Century. Polycarp definitely quotes from 1 Peter in the early Second Century: "In whom, though now ye see Him not, ye believe, and believing, rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory [1 Peter 1:8];' into which joy many desire to enter" (*Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians* 1:3).³ In the late Second Century, Irenaeus bears direct testimony to Petrine authorship of the letter:

[A]nd Peter says in his Epistle: "Whom, not seeing, ye love; in whom, though now ye see Him not, ye have believed, ye shall rejoice with joy unspeakable [1 Peter 1:8]" (*Against Heresies* 4.9.2).⁴

[All this is declared,] that we may know that we shall give account to God not of deeds only, as slaves, but even of words and thoughts, as those who have truly received the power of liberty, in which [condition] a man is more severely tested, whether he will reverence, and fear, and love the Lord. And for this reason Peter says "that we have not liberty as a cloak of maliciousness" [1 Peter 2:16], but as the means of testing and evidencing faith (*Against Heresies* 4.16.5).⁵

And this it is which has been said also by Peter: "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom now also, not seeing, ye believe; and believing, ye shall rejoice with joy unspeakable" [1 Peter 1:8]. For our face shall see the face of the Lord and shall rejoice with joy unspeakable,—that is to say, when it shall behold its own Delight (*Against Heresies* 5.7.2).⁶

The Epistle of 1 Peter is quoted within Second Century Christian writings, attributing its contents and authorship squarely to the Apostle Peter. The Fourth Century Christian historian

² R.P. Martin, "Peter, First Epistle of," in *ISBE*, 3:807.

³ *BibleWorks* 8.0: Schaff, *Early Church Fathers*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

Eusebius later details how, “As to the writings of Peter, one of his epistles called the first is acknowledged as genuine. This was anciently used by the ancient fathers in their writings as an undoubted work of the apostle” (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.3.1).⁷ While ancient witnesses attest to genuine Petrine authorship of 1 Peter, many theologians today doubt it on various levels. In the view of Guthrie, however, “The very great weight of patristic evidence in favour of Petrine authorship and the absence of any dissenting voices raises so strong a presupposition in favour of the correctness of the claims of the epistle to be Peter’s own work that it is surprising that this has been questioned.”⁸

There is some debate as to where Peter was when the letter of 1 Peter was composed. 1 Peter 5:13 identifies the author’s location as being “Babylon.” Is this to be regarded as Babylon in Mesopotamia, or is it a veiled reference to the city of Rome? Many consider this a reference to the latter.⁹ The traditional composition of 1 Peter, as summarized by Eusebius, is that Peter traveled to Rome with John Mark, called “my son Mark” in this letter (5:3). There, he orally communicated to Mark the material that Mark would incorporate into his Gospel, and he would also compile the Epistle of 1 Peter:

“Mark [was] the companion of Peter, and whose Gospel we have, that he should leave them a monument in writing of the doctrine thus orally communicated....Peter made mention of Mark in the first epistle, which he is also said to have composed at the same city of Rome, and that he showed this fact, by calling the city by an usual figure of speech, Babylon” (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.15.1, 2).¹⁰

Various conservatives think that this letter had to have been written in the early 60s C.E., placing 1 Peter in the range of 64-67 C.E. presumably, when Emperor Nero was in power in Rome.¹¹ While persecution is undeniably a theme seen in 1 Peter, Carson and Moo do not think that any specific Roman persecution of Believers in history, by a known emperor, is intended, but rather “What is implied...is the hostility Christians were known to have faced from the general Roman population.”¹² They further observe how “The readers of 1 Peter were probably being criticized, mocked, discriminated against, and perhaps even brought into court on trumped-up charges.”¹³

Liberals today largely deny authentic Petrine authorship of 1 Peter, within the lifetime of the Apostle. A commonly proposed date by liberals, for the composition of 1 Peter, is usually thought to be the late First Century during the reign of Domitian.¹⁴ It is instead often proposed that some kind of Petrine school or group of admirers in Rome, possibly involving figures like Silvanus (Silas) and Mark, composed 1 Peter. In the view of *ABD* at least, “1 Peter represents the witness of the apostle Peter, the personal networks of a brotherhood reaching

⁷ *Ecclesiastical History*, 61.

⁸ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 762.

⁹ Cf. John H. Elliot, “Peter, First Epistle of,” in *ABD*, 5:277; J.R. Michaels, “1 Peter,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments*, 915; Carson and Moo, 646.

¹⁰ *Ecclesiastical History*, 50.

¹¹ Martin, “Peter, First Epistle of,” in *ISBE*, 3:808-809.

¹² Carson and Moo, 639.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ W.C. van Unnik, “Peter, First Letter of,” in *IDB*, 3:762; Graham N. Stanton, “1 Peter,” in *ECB*, pp 1494-1495.

from Jerusalem to Rome, and the rich tradition of the Roman Christian community...Speaking in the name of their martyred leader, this Petrine branch of the family of God in 'Babylon' assured fellow members of the household dispersed throughout Asia Minor of the bonds of suffering, faith, and home which united"¹⁵ them. The Epistle of 1 Peter, then, could actually preserve some distinct elements of Petrine teaching, but would not be an actual transcription of something authorized by the Apostle Peter.

Another reason often issued against genuine Petrine authorship of 1 Peter, is how Peter mainly had a mission to the Jewish people, and the letter has too broad an audience to really substantiate a non-Jewish readership.¹⁶ This assumes too much of a division between the main missionary audiences of Paul (the nations) and Peter (the Jews). It is not as though Paul never reached out to his own Jewish people, as he surely lamented over their widescale rejection of the Messiah (cf. Romans 11:13-14). Similarly, Peter was certainly not one who disregarded the nations, as authentic Petrine authorship of 1 Peter requires us to recognize this Apostle caring for the needs of *all people*. More to the point, if Paul had recently died and Peter needed to take over some of Paul's previous responsibilities among the nations, then this certainly allows for non-Jewish Believers to be within the *direct* purview of Peter's influence and mentoring.¹⁷

Liberal theologians also tend to doubt Petrine authorship of 1 Peter, because of the high Greek composition style that this letter demonstrates to have,¹⁸ as a formal epistle.¹⁹ The Apostle Peter with a fisherman's background is believed to have been largely uneducated and unsophisticated (cf. Acts 4:13),²⁰ which is hardly what the Epistle of 1 Peter demonstrates from its author. Yet, given the amount of time that transpired between Peter's calling by Yeshua to follow Him, and the strong likelihood of secretarial assistance, Petrine authorship cannot be ruled out at all. "[I]t is difficult to find arguments which rule out Petrine authorship completely, especially if the involvement of a co-worker or secretary in this letter composition is posited" (*ECB*).²¹

Is it true that as a fisherman, Peter would have been unable to learn or communicate at all in Greek? While Acts 4:13 says that Peter was "uneducated and untrained," this "probably means only that Peter and John were not versed in rabbinic lore" (Martin, *ISBE*),²² meaning that neither was ignorant in terms of basic reading and writing. As far as Peter's own Greek competence is concerned, "it must be remembered that in Peter's day Galilee was probably bilingual: the Greek language would have been familiar to Peter from boyhood (his own brother's name [Andrew] is a Greek one), and being a fisherman and living on one of the great

¹⁵ Elliot, "Peter, First Epistle of," in *ABD*, 5:277-278.

¹⁶ Cf. Peter H. Davids, "Peter, First Letter of," in *EDB*, 1037.

¹⁷ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 773-774.

¹⁸ Cf. Elliot, "Peter, First Epistle of," in *ABD*, 5:272.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5:270.

²⁰ van Unnik, "Peter, First Letter of," in *IDB*, 3:763.

²¹ Stanton, "1 Peter," in *ECB*, 1495.

²² Martin, "Peter, First Epistle of," in *ISBE*, 3:808.

trade routes would have made it necessary for him to speak it regularly” (*NBCR*).²³ Carson and Moo further describe, “recent research on languages in first-century [Israel] has revealed that Greek was widely used...Peter probably grew up using Greek to converse with buyers of his fish,”²⁴ as a second language. When we couple this with three decades of ministry work by the Apostle Peter by the time of 1 Peter’s composition, *including* some regular interaction with Greeks and Romans, Peter would have had to learn Greek in the Lord’s service by His Divine empowerment. None of this should ever subtract, however, from *Kefa* (כֶּפֶא) or *Kēphas* (Κηφᾶς) being a First Century Jew with a high appreciation for the Tanach Scriptures.²⁵

Even if Peter were not necessarily an expert Greek speaker or orator, this by no means excludes Peter authorizing the composition of this letter via the hand of an amanuensis. The letter itself says, “Through Silvanus...I have written to you briefly” (5:12). If Peter could not write in excellent Greek, there is nothing wrong with Silvanus (Silas) serving as Peter’s secretary in the composition of 1 Peter, as well as playing some role in specifying the letter’s contents. Silvanus likely did the same with Paul, as is attested in 1 Thessalonians 1:1. Silvanus playing a large role in the composition of 1 Peter is intensified if Peter were at all confined or arrested, like Paul was when 2 Timothy was composed (which was likely transcribed at Paul’s request by Luke).

A few conservatives, though, have actually ascribed Silvanus/Silas as being the actual author of the Epistle of 1 Peter.²⁶ While there are no ancient traditions that attest to this, such a view would by necessity, probably place the composition of 1 Peter quite close to the time of the Apostle’s death. Silvanus being the author of 1 Peter, incorporating the teachings delivered to him by Peter himself, is to be preferred over a largely anonymous Petrine school composing it a generation later than Peter at the end of the First Century. Guthrie points us more in the direction of Silvanus/Silas being the co-author of 1 Peter, along with the Apostle, stating, “The Silas (Silvanus) hypothesis cannot, therefore be ruled out, and forms a reasonable alternative for those whose main objection to Petrine authorship is linguistic.”²⁷

Sadly, Messianics who might advocate that 1 Peter would have been written in Hebrew or Aramaic, might tend to fall into the same liberal arguments against Peter writing it. A Hebrew or Aramaic origin simply does not align with the history, extant traditions, and the intended audience of the epistle in mainly Northwestern Asia Minor. Linguistically speaking, “1 Peter has long been recognized” for the “excellence of its Greek style” (*ECB*),²⁸ as the author’s “command of Greek syntactical usages is not inconsiderable” (Guthrie).²⁹

²³ David H. Wheaton, “1 Peter,” in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1236; cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 767-768.

²⁴ Carson and Moo, 642.

²⁵ While most of the Apostles’ original Hebrew or Aramaic names (with the exception of Andrew and Philip) were simply transliterated into the Greek Scriptures, the name of Kefa, meaning “rock,” was apparently both transliterated and translated (John 1:42). One sees the Apostle Peter referred to by both the transliteration *Kēphas* (for *Kefa*) and translation *Petros* (Πέτρος), “rock.”

²⁶ Cf. Michaels, “1 Peter,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments*, 916.

²⁷ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 769.

²⁸ Stanton, “1 Peter,” in *ECB*, 1493.

²⁹ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 763.

The intended audience of the Epistle of 1 Peter is identified early in its composition: “To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen” (1:1). The fact that 1 Peter lacks any quantitative personal references from the writer to the readers, indicates that it was to be read as a kind of circular epistle, and was not a private letter. Was the audience of 1 Peter Jewish, non-Jewish, or a mix of both? Both conservative and liberal interpreters are agreed that the audience was mixed.³⁰ While the Jewish Believers who received 1 Peter would have probably had an easier time understanding the many intertextual quotations from and allusions to the Tanach (Old Testament), a non-Jewish audience can by no means be excluded.

The audience of 1 Peter is actually labeled to be “the exiles of the Dispersion” (1:1, RSV), *parepidēmois diasporas* (παρεπιδήμοις διασπορᾶς). In the First Century C.E., this would have been understood by many in terms of Diaspora Jews.³¹ This leads some to think that the primary audience of 1 Peter was just Jewish Believers. Does Peter intend to include non-Jewish Believers as well, as a part of the Dispersion? The text of the letter forces any honest reader to draw non-Jews as being among those who would hear 1 Peter: “For the time already past is sufficient *for you* to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries” (4:3). Among “the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance” (1:14) would have been pagan idolatry, which does not apply too well if the audience of 1 Peter is exclusively Jewish.

In terms of the identification with non-Jewish Believers making up a part of “those who reside as aliens” (1:1), Peter references numerous passages from the Tanach, connecting his readership with what the calling of Israel is all about: **a people for God’s own possession who are to testify to the world of His greatness** (1 Peter 2:9-10; cf. Deuteronomy 7:6; 10:15; Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 61:6; 43:21; Deuteronomy 4:20; 14:2; and Hosea 2:23).³² Most notable of these references has to be Hosea 2:23 and its appeal to how, “I will say to those who were not My people, ‘You are My people!’ And they will say, ‘*You are my God!*’” The Apostle Peter definitely thought that non-Jewish Believers were incorporated into the community of Israel via their faith in Yeshua.³³ Yet, while claims of replacement theology can be made of the many Christian theologians who point this out, the perspective of Carson and Moo is much more tempered: “[Peter’s] emphasis is entirely on the inclusion of these mainly Gentile believers in the historic people of God.”³⁴

The Epistle of 1 Peter is extremely rich for the array of contents it possesses, in only five chapters. “Probably no document in the NT is so theological as 1 Peter, if ‘theological’ is taken in the strict sense of teaching about God” (Martin, *ISBE*).³⁵ 1 Peter includes a significant

³⁰ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 786; Elliot, “Peter, First Epistle of,” in *ABD*, 5:273.

Against: Carson and Moo, 647 who think that the audience is almost exclusively non-Jewish.

³¹ van Unnik, “Peter, First Letter of,” in *IDB*, 3:761.

³² Kurt Aland, et. al., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1998), pp 788-789.

³³ Cf. Michaels, “1 Peter,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments*, 917; Peter H. Davids, “Peter, First Letter of,” in *EDB*, 1038; Carson and Moo, 650.

³⁴ Carson and Moo, 651.

³⁵ Martin, “Peter, First Epistle of,” in *ISBE*, 3:809.

amount of Tanach intertextuality and allusions. The *ABD* entry for 1 Peter includes a rather extensive list of connections for any reader of the letter to consider:

“From the Greek OT (LXX) use was made of no less than twenty-four texts or combinations of texts. Linking the eschatological community with the history of God’s covenant people, this material served to stress the social estrangement and oppression of God’s people as resident aliens in diaspora (1:1, 17-18; 2:11; 3:6 [Gen 23:4; cf. Gen 12:1-20, 20:1-18; Isa 52:3, 5]; 3:10-12 [Ps 33(34)]; 4:14 [Isa 11:2]; 5:8-9, 13 [Jeremiah 50:51]; their election and holiness (1:15-16 [Lev 19:2]; 2:5, 9 [Exod 19:6; Isa 43:20; Hos 1:6, 9; 2:1, 3, 25]); the rejection, suffering, and exaltation of the Messiah-Servant (2:4-8 [Isa 8:14, 28:16; Psa 117(118):22]; 2:22-24 [Isa 53:4, 6, 9]); divine redemption of the righteous and oppressed (1:13 [Exod 12:11]; 1:17-19, cf. 1:2 [Exod 12-15; Isa 52:3, 5]; examples of Sarah, 3:5-6, and Noah, 3:20); fear of God rather than man (2:17 [Prov 24:21]; 3:6 [Prov 3:25]; 3:14-15 [Isa 8:12-13]); moral conduct (3:10-12 [Ps 33(34):13-17]; 4:8 [Prov 10:12]); the imminence of divine judgment (2:12 [Isa 10:3]; 4:17 [Ezek 9:6]; 4:18 [Prov 11:31 LXX]); and God’s nurture (2:3 [Psa 33(34):9]) and exaltation of the humble (5:5 [Prov 3:34 LXX]; 5:7 [Psa 54(55):23]).”³⁶

The main thrust of the audience of 1 Peter being “aliens and strangers” in Diaspora (1:1), widely concerns how they are in exile from the realm of God’s Heaven in a world of sinners. Historically, people regarded as “aliens” were subject to “Constant exposure to local fear and suspicion, ignorant slander, discrimination and manipulation...[as] the regular lot” (*ABD*).³⁷ The Believers, who would hear Peter’s admonitions to them, were most responsible for not responding in kind to the ways of the world, and for demonstrating good works (2:12) representative of their Messiah faith. There is an expected submission of the redeemed in Yeshua toward the government (2:14-17), of slaves toward their masters (2:18-25), and wives toward their husbands (3:1-7). Yet, regardless of the various specific conclusions drawn by today’s interpreters about the original, ancient setting of Peter’s instructions, all should agree that “these duties are transformed by the example of Christ (2:21-25) and by the purpose of those duties: to testify to God’s power and goodness (3:1)” (Carson and Moo).³⁸ This requires the power of the Lord to change these intuitions from within, which in the case of slaves toward masters would necessarily mean the eventual abolishment of slavery.

Due to much of the widespread attention in New Testament studies often given to the teachings of Yeshua, and/or the theology of the Apostle Paul, a letter like 1 Peter has been too overlooked.³⁹ More and more scholars, though, are beginning to reconsider the value of the Epistle of 1 Peter.⁴⁰ Local pastors and laypersons more generally are those who have tended to value 1 Peter the most, as a part of various sermons or their personal Bible reading and study.

³⁶ Elliot, “Peter, First Epistle of,” in *ABD*, 5:271.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5:273.

³⁸ Carson and Moo, 637.

³⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 650.

⁴⁰ Elliot, “Peter, First Epistle of,” in *ABD*, 5:270.

Different readers of 1 Peter have tended to be impacted by a multitude of themes witnessed in the text. One of the most overarching of such themes is the priesthood of all Believers (2:5), and the service that born again men and women are to demonstrate, incumbent of their salvation. Endurance through suffering and persecution (3:13-14, 17) is also a major theme of 1 Peter. All followers of Yeshua are to live like Him, having holy lives (4:3-5).

The Epistle of 1 Peter is by no means a text overlooked by today's Messianic community, as many of its verses have served to instruct Messianic Believers in the ways of holiness. One area of some interest to all readers should be Peter's quotation of Hosea 2:23 in 1 Peter 2:9-10, as this Tanach prophecy is applied to a mixed group of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers. What are the implications of this? Peter's immediate concern is obviously for the spiritual character and proper lifestyle of his audience. They have a special calling upon them that is very serious for them to fulfill—**and the same is true of any of us today**. Yet, the personal salvation of all those who encounter 1 Peter is squarely placed within the expectations of Israel's national, corporate restoration. The most that any of us can conclude about this, is that Peter applies a restoration of Israel prophecy, in the process of being fulfilled, to non-Jewish Believers *too*—but obviously leaves the details of fulfillment to the Lord. Investigating the fuller ramifications of 1 Peter 2:9-10, both missionally and eschatologically, will be very interesting to witness in the future years and decades of the emerging Messianic movement.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 1 PETER:

1. How important do you believe it was for Peter to emphasize the proper conduct of his First Century audience? How important do you believe this is for us today?

2. If the recipients of Peter's letter were facing (some kind of) persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire, why do you think Peter urged some kind of submission to human authority?

3. What single lesson from 1 Peter do you believe the emerging Messianic movement needs to have a proper handle on?

REFLECTION ON 1 PETER'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Epistle of 1 Peter: