

Tuesday Evening Bible Study
Series #9: 1 Peter, Jude and 2 Peter
Introduction to 1 Peter & Chapter 1
Tuesday, September 12, 2017

Introduction to 1 Peter

Summary

The First Letter of Peter is the twenty-first book in the New Testament. It is situated among the books typically referred to as the “Catholic Letters” (James through Jude)—”catholic” in the sense of being generally applicable. This letter is one of the most hope-filled books in the New Testament. Its purpose is to encourage Christian converts living in the midst of a hostile society. It does this by emphasizing their new life and salvation in the risen Christ (who is their “living hope”), showing how they became heirs of the people of God described in the Old Testament, and helping them understand what it means to live faithfully among people who ridicule and harass them. Throughout this letter, Jesus Christ’s life, and especially his suffering, is used as an example of how they are to understand and bear their sufferings as they seek to do God’s will.

Who wrote it?

A pseudonymous work, 1 Peter is the work of an unknown author, writing from Rome, in the name and memory of the Apostle Peter.

When was it written?

Most scholars support a date between 75 and 95 C.E., with the early 90s being most likely. This would mean that 1 Peter was written a generation after the deaths of Peter and Paul in the mid 60s.

What is the context in which it was written?

By the last decade of the first century C.E., Christianity had spread throughout much of the Roman Empire—far beyond its origins in Palestine following the crucifixion of Jesus some sixty years earlier. Although Jesus’ earliest followers existed for a while as a Jewish sect, by the time 1 Peter was written Christianity and Judaism had largely gone their separate ways, a development hastened by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. While most of the earliest Christians were Jewish, after that time most new converts were Gentiles. Therefore, while this letter mentions many figures from the Old Testament as well as many acts and words of God therein, there is no mention of the Jews as the people of Israel or of the history of relationships and problems between Christians and Jews. The declaration to the letter’s (mostly Gentile) recipients is that they too are inheritors of the Old Testament’s promises. They too are Israel; they too are the elect and God’s own people. As such, they will be at odds with the values, customs, and lifestyles of the non-Christian Gentiles among whom they live. They will be as aliens and strangers, different even from non-Christian members of their families and friends. They probably would have been excluded from many occupations and social occasions as well as scorned and criticized for joining a cult or belonging to a possibly dangerous and unpatriotic sect. In such a situation of being an unwelcome minority, Christians’ natural tendency might have been to withdraw even further from the majority culture, increasing their isolation and arousing additional suspicion. 1 Peter urges the opposite

response: engage in the society and be better than the ordinary citizens, so that good conduct will be noticed and the truth of the readers' faith will be demonstrated. This will not be easy, but it will be to obey the God who is the creator and redeemer of all people and all societies. God has called these scattered followers of Christ to proclaim the mighty acts of God.

The letter's opening verse names the Apostle Peter as the author. The closing verses say that he writes "through Silvanus." The evidence for a later composition (probably in the early 90s) and the letter's use of themes and expressions from the letters of the Apostle Paul suggest that 1 Peter is a pseudonymous work, written in the tradition of Peter after his death.

How do I read 1 Peter?

1 Peter is carefully written and repays careful reading. Read it as good news for bad times: truth from the One who is the truth, hope from the One who is our living hope, and encouragement from the One who has promised to be faithful to us all the way through eternity, no matter how difficult and chaotic the present may seem. This letter expresses the gospel in rich, varied, and powerful ways and then draws from it interesting, complex, and specific implications for how Christians might think about living faithfully in their society. The distance between 1 Peter's context in the first century and the context of the modern world is huge in many ways, requiring us to avoid making too easy applications of the letter's words to our own lives. On the other hand, the daring and creative ways in which the letter works out its view of faith and life challenge us to take these ideas seriously and to think with equal daring and creativity regarding the challenges facing Christians today. The take-home message of 1 Peter is that believers have reasons for hope, even in times of apparent hopelessness and persecution, because Christ is raised and living, and God is at work in the world.

Structure of 1 Peter

- A. Salutation (1:1-2)
- B. Thanksgiving: A Living Hope (1:3-12)
- C. Body of the Letter (1:13 – 5:11)
 - a. A new identity of the people of God (1:13 – 2:10)
 - i. A call to holy living (1:13-22)
 - ii. Loving one another from the heart (1:22 – 2:3)
 - iii. The living stone and a chosen people (2:1-10)
 - b. Christian conduct in the given structures of society (2:11 – 3:12)
 - i. Live as servants of God (2:11-17)
 - ii. The example of Christ's suffering (2:18-25)
 - iii. Wives and husbands (3:1-12)
 - c. Responsible suffering in the face of society (3:13 – 5:11)
 - i. Suffering for doing right (3:13-22)
 - ii. Good stewards of God's grace (4:1-11)
 - iii. Suffering as a Christian (4:12-19)
 - iv. Tending the flock of God (5:1-11)
- D. Epistolary Conclusion (5:12-14)

Notes on Chapter 1

- The format of the opening verses follows the standard Greco-Roman epistolary pattern.
- It was probably intended to be circulated among the communities in Asia Minor.
- The introduction of this letter implies that Peter was considered an important figure at the end of the 1st Century.
- The letter contains Jewish themes (election, exile, diaspora, covenant) and doesn't really express opposition to Judaism. Perhaps the communities intended to receive the letter were Jewish Christians.
- Hope is emphasized in 1 Peter, because it is a fundamental virtue that defines the Christian experience.
 - The act of salvation gives meaning to the present existence of the Christian. One is born to a living hope, and no longer condemned to a life of aimlessness.
- Even in the midst of suffering, the Christian has a right to joy because of salvation through Jesus Christ.
- The cosmic scope of salvation history is evoked in v. 12. Humans exist in a graced state.
- Vv. 13-16 show a shift in tone to an imperative rooted in the consequences of being in a graced state.
- Obedience = conforming one's life to the will of God. As Christians, we can no longer live in the pattern of our former existence.
- This exhortation to imitate God ends with a quotation from the Hebrew Scriptures (Leviticus 19:2).
- Vv. 17-21 evoke fearing God as a judge. Christians cannot take their call to holiness casually.
- "ransomed" – is the rendering of a verb that was used in the Greco-Roman literature to refer to the manumission of slaves or liberation of prisoners. In NT writing, it is a metaphor for the redemptive power of Christ's death.

Resources

Notes from The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV), 2010

Notes from HarperCollins Study Bible (NRSV), 1989

Mark Kolden, "1 Peter" in <http://www.enterthebible.org/newtestament.aspx?rid=60>

"1 Peter" in *Sacra Pagina*, Daniel J. Harrington, ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2008)



The five provinces mentioned in the address of 1 Peter (1.1) make up a large proportion of Asia Minor.