

Second Epistle of Peter - Introduction

by Arno Clemens Gaebelein

The sermon defends the authenticity and authorship of the Second Epistle of Peter, citing internal evidence and refuting critical claims.

Scripture: John 21:18, Acts 15:14, 2 Peter 1:1-2, Jude 1:3

Topics: "Biblical Authority", "Apostolic Doctrine"

Description

Arno Clemens Gaebelein delves into the controversy surrounding the authenticity of the Second Epistle of Peter, addressing the lack of external evidence but emphasizing the strong internal evidence supporting Petrine authorship. Despite critical claims and evasions, the unique character of the Epistle, prophetic warnings, and references to Peter's experiences with Jesus affirm its credibility. Gaebelein highlights the division of 2 Peter into sections focusing on God's provisions, warnings about false teachers, and prophecies about the future of the earth, emphasizing the importance of understanding the Epistle's message.

Transcript

Introduction

The authenticity of this Second Epistle of Peter has occasioned a great deal of controversy and many are questioning it, as it has been done in the past. It is true the most ancient sources of post-apostolic writings do not mention this Epistle. What we have pointed out in the introductions of most of the other New Testament books, that their authenticity is confirmed by references in the fragments of the writings of the church fathers, such as Polycarp, Papias, Clement of Rome and others, cannot be done with this Epistle. Some scholars in their research claim that traces of this Epistle are discernable in the testimonies of Polycarp, Ignatius, in the letter of Barnabas and in the testimony of Clement of Rome, but they are so very faint and fanciful, that they are not reliable. But not finding a direct allusion in these sources does not mean anything at all. The greater portion of the writings of the men who were in touch with the Apostles and the direct disciples of the men who knew Peter and Paul, have been lost. If we had all they have written we would probably find in them references to this Epistle.

The Epistle is not found in the Peshito version. According to Bishop Westcott in his Canon of the New Testament there are in existence two classes of manuscripts of this version. Both omit the Second and Third Epistles of John, the Second Epistle of Peter, the Epistle of Jude and the Book of Revelation, but include all the other books. This Canon seems to have been generally maintained in the Syrian churches.

It is reproduced in the Arabic version of Erpenius, which was taken from the Peshito. Cosmas, an Egyptian traveller of the sixth century, states that only three of the so-called "Catholic" Epistles were received by the Syrians. Later sources charge the Syrian churches with mutilating the New Testament by not having these books in their Bibles.

The Epistle is also omitted in the Latin version, that is, in the oldest editions. That the Vulgate is unreliable is well known. Westcott makes the following argument about the missing Second Epistle of Peter in the Latin version: "If we suppose that it was once received into the canon like the First Epistle, it would in all probability have been translated by the same person, as seems to have been the case with the Gospel of Luke and the Acts (both written by Luke), though their connection is less Obvious; and while every allowance is made for the difference in style in the original Epistles, we must look for the same rendering of the same phrases. But when on the contrary, it appears that the Latin text of the Epistle not only exhibits constant and remarkable difference from the text of other parts of the Vulgate, but also differs from the First Epistle in the rendering of words common to both, when it further appears that it differs not less clearly from the Epistle of Jude in those parts which are almost identical in the Greek; then the supposition that it was admitted into the Canon at the same time with them becomes at once unnatural. It is indeed possible that the two Epistles may have been received at the same time and yet have found different translators." But this argument does not mean at all that this Epistle is spurious and should be excluded from the New Testament.

But while the Epistle is not mentioned in the Muratorian fragment, in the writings of Polycarp, Papias, Irenaeus and others, and while it is missing in the Peshito and the earlier editions of the Vulgate, Hippolytus (living in the first half of the third century) was evidently acquainted with the Epistle, for in writing on the Antichrist he makes use of 2 Peter 1:21. Eusebius, the church historian, gives incontrovertible testimony that the Epistle was positively known at the close of the second century as the second Epistle of Peter. He shows that Clement of Alexandria (about 190 A.D.) knew the Epistle as the work of Peter and used it. The successor of Clement, Origen, according to Eusebius wrote: "Peter has left one acknowledged Epistle, and possibly also a second, for it is disputed." It was through Jerome's (Eusebius Hieronymus, born 390 A.D.) efforts that the Epistle was added to the Vulgate. He wrote: "Peter wrote two Epistles, which are termed Catholic, the second of which is denied by most to be his, because of the disagreement of its style with that of the former Epistle." On account of these historical facts opinions among scholars have been very much divided. Many reject the Petrine authorship of this Epistle, but other scholars accept it without any question. Among those who defend the Epistle against those who deny it are scholars of the highest reputation like Alford, Olshausen, Keil and others.

The Sufficiency of Internal Evidence

The fact is that external evidences to confirm the authenticity of Second Peter are not needed, for the internal evidences are beyond controversy of such a nature as to establish the Petrine authorship. The Epistle starts with the name of Peter. In the Greek the name Simon is spelled "Symeon" or "Simeon." If we turn to Acts 15:14 we read that James called Peter "Symeon," the Aramaic form for Simon. Then the writer refers to the fact that he would have soon to put off this tabernacle "even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath showed me." He was now an old man, and the Lord had spoken to him at the lakeside. "When thou art old thou shalt stretch forth thy hands" (John 21). Still stronger is the reference of the writer to the transfiguration, where Peter was present, and he speaks of it as being an eyewitness of His coming and of His majesty And, finally, the writer says: "This second Epistle, beloved, I now write unto you" (3:1).

Critical Claims and Evasions

This internal evidence destructive critics try to evade and offset. They claim that the writer was not Simon Peter, but that some unknown author, using Peter's name, wrote this document. It is the same foolish invention advanced by Old Testament critics as to the authorship of the book of Daniel.

To establish this theory they point to the fact that there was a tendency in the early church to use Peter's name in different pseudo documents, such spurious writings as "The Gospel of Peter; The Revelation of Peter; the Acts of Peter, and the travels of Peter." But the fact of these forgeries, some of which cover some of the text of the Second Epistle of Peter, is an evidence that a genuine writing exists. According to the opinions of the men who reject the authorship of Peter, the writer of this Epistle to give standing to his production thought best to impersonate the Apostle Peter and so he started right in the beginning by saying he is Peter. And he is careful to select the Aramaic form of Peter's name, the name Symeon. Would a forger not rather have avoided that uncommon use of Peter's name? But, furthermore, he also tells us that the Lord had told him about His death; and yet this man was not Peter, nor had the Lord ever told him what He had spoken to Peter about the time and manner of His death. Then the writer of the Epistle claims to have been on the Mount of Transfiguration, that he beheld His glory there and heard the voice of the Father speaking. He is positive that he was present and was an eyewitness, the strongest possible claim.

Yet if it was not Peter who wrote this Epistle, then it must have been either John or James, because there were only three eyewitnesses of the transfiguration. But would John or James write thus, hiding his identity under the name of Peter? Then the writer, assuming the name of Peter, declares that he had written the first Epistle, which Peter beyond doubt wrote, yet he had not written that Epistle. Here are three (in plain English) lies. A man writes an Epistle claiming to be Peter, but he is not Peter at all; hence he is a fraud. The same man claims that he was at the lake of Tiberias, that the Lord told him about His death; yet he was not there, for he was not Peter; therefore this impersonator is a fraud. This is an especially strong point. The fact that the Lord had announced Peter's death was known to but a few at that time, when the Epistle was written, which we take was about the year 65 A.D.

The Gospel of John, where the Lord's prophecy as to Peter's future is recorded, had not yet been written. Furthermore, he says that he saw the transfiguration, which he did not see; hence he lied. The fourth lie is his claim that he wrote the first Epistle, which he did not write. It is astonishing what inventions the enemies of the Bible can bring forth simply to discredit the Word of God and to deny its authenticity. If Peter is not the writer of this Epistle the whole Epistle is a miserable fraud, a dishonest piece of work, a forgery of the worst kind, which every honest man must despise. The foolish babblings of critics: "it is a useful document and should be read by all Christians, though Peter did not write it himself," is ridiculous. Either Peter wrote it and then it must be accepted; or Peter did not write it and in such a case the whole business is a forgery and a fraud. But would a fraud ever have written such a wonderful message as the one with which this second Epistle begins? Would a conscious fraud have warned against apostasy as found in the second chapter? Would he, could he, have exhorted fellow-believers in the way as it is done in this Epistle? It is a moral impossibility.

The Character of the Second Epistle

One of the critics makes the following statement in denying the Petrine authorship: "The fact that the only allusions to the incidents in the Lord's life found in the Epistle are such as would support the character as

one writing as Peter does become, in view of the silence of the Epistle as to the passion, the resurrection, the ascension, and of the absence from it of allusions to the Lord's teaching as recorded in the gospel, are a serious ground for questioning the Petrine authorship of the Epistle" (Chase). Like most critics this one lacks in spiritual discernment. In fact, if critics had some spiritual insight in the majestic scope of God's holy Word, they would not be critics, but worshipers. All second Epistles, except Second Corinthians, have a peculiar character. Second Thessalonians, Second Timothy, Second and Third John, and the little Epistle of Jude are in reality prophetic. They all speak of the future, the coming evils in professing Christendom, the apostasy, and all warn against these things. The Second Epistle of Peter shares the same character with the other second Epistles and Jude's Epistle. There was no need for Peter to refer again to the passion being outside of the scope of this second letter, he had given his witness and testimony as to these facts so abundantly in his first Epistle. The two Epistles harmonize in many ways.

Another Supposed Difficulty

Another supposed difficulty is the similarity that exists between the second chapter of this Epistle and the Epistle of Jude. This difficulty will be taken up more fully in connection with the annotations of the chapter and in the introduction to Jude's Epistle. The learned scholars have spent much time on the question whether Jude copied from Peter or Peter copied from Jude. Some claim that Peter had Jude's Epistle and used it; others claim that Jude imitated Peter. Even so good a scholar as the late Dean Alford says: "It is well known that, besides various scattered resemblances, a long passage occurs, included in the limits Jude 3-19; 2 Peter 2:1-19, describing in both cases the heretical enemies of the gospel, couched in terms so similar as to preclude all idea of entire independence. If considerations of human probability are here as everywhere else to be introduced into our estimate of sacred writings, then either one saw and used the text of the other, or both drew from a common document or a common source of oral apostolic teaching." This in reality affects the truth of inspiration, and leans towards criticism. If Peter sat down and copied Jude, what Peter wrote was not inspired, but copied. And if Jude sat down and wrote after the pattern of Peter, copied him, and worked over his testimony, then Jude is not inspired. But both, Peter and Jude were inspired, and therefore they wrote independent of each other, the Holy Spirit guiding their respective pens, in giving the same testimony of warning.

The Division of Second Peter

This Second Epistle of Peter may be looked upon as an appendix or complement of the First Epistle. It introduces a testimony as to the future, connected with the coming of the Lord, which the First Epistle so frequently mentions. While the First Epistle is silent as to the coming evils preceding the coming of the Lord, this Second Epistle sounds the warning and gives, as already stated in the preceding introduction, a prophetic picture of the conditions of Christendom when the age closes. Here, too, we find the exhortations of Peter, similar to those in the first letter. Peter himself states the purpose when he wrote: "This second Epistle, beloved, I now write unto you, in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance." While the language may differ in some respects from the language of the First Epistle, the style and development of the Epistle is just like the first, which is even noticeable in our English version. He writes first of the gracious provisions, which are made for those of like precious faith through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, which includes present provisions in precious promises, and the gift of all things that pertain unto life and godliness, as well as the gift of the Word of Prophecy.

The second chapter unfolds the coming dangers of the last days of this age. The false teachers and their pernicious doctrines are revealed with the corresponding warnings to beware of them. The concluding chapter is prophetic; it reveals the future, including the coming great transformation when the physical earth will pass through a judgment by fire, to come forth in an eternal resurrection glory as a new earth, surrounded by new heavens. We follow, therefore, in our annotations the division of the Epistle in three chapters as we have it in our Bibles.

I. THE GRACIOUS PROVISIONS OF GOD (chapter 1)

II. THE EVILS TO COME THROUGH FALSE TEACHERS (chapter 2)

III. THE FUTURE OF THE EARTH AND THE CONCLUSION (chapter 3)

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