



From Atheist to Theist (Part 31)

Challenging the Apostle Peter

By

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What would move a strong atheist to become a strong theist?

In my case the answer was evidence for theism, specifically for Christian theism.

I recently began looking at evidence for the reliability of the New Testament writings. It's important to remember that the New Testament is not a 'single' writing but a 'library' of 27 individual writings by men Jesus Christ chose to be apostles, or men the apostles chose to work closely with them (e.g. Mark, Luke).

[Just a reminder that I'm only revealing the evidence available for investigation in early 1971. A future series will look at evidence that has been discovered since that time.]

I have looked at the evidence for letters written by the Apostle Paul and James (most likely the half-brother of Jesus).

The Epistle by James was the first of several letters known as the General Epistles. The next letters in that category are 1 and 2 Peter.

Here is a basic investigative process for determining ancient authorship:

- Internal evidence – what we find in the letter itself .. claim of authorship, historical information, geographical information, biographical information.
- Language and style – comparing writing style of other letters believed to have been written by same author (e.g. vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, idioms).
- Content – comparing the content with other letters believed to have been written by same author (e.g. theology, historical data).
- External evidence – ancient writers supporting claim of authorship, ancient writers quoting from writings in question.

1 Peter

Peter was one of the first men Jesus chose to become a disciple and apostle.

“And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ They immediately left their nets and followed Him.” Matthew 4:18-20

“One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, ‘You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas’ (which is translated, A Stone).” John 1:40 42

Peter's name is mentioned in the New Testament more times than any other apostle, except for Paul. Peter was a fisherman with a strong personality. He often spoke first among the apostles and made many boasts prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter was also the first apostle to speak to the crowds in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost.

“But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, ‘Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words...’ Acts 2:14

So, is the man named Peter found in the Gospels and the Book of Acts the same man who wrote the New Testament letter known as 1 Peter?

Internal Evidence

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied.” 1 Peter 1:1-2

The letter begins with a greeting that is similar to other letters of the 1st century AD. The author identifies himself as ‘Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.’

He writes to the ‘pilgrims of the Dispersion.’ The Greek words here are interesting:

εκλεκτοις παρεπιδημοις διασπορας (eklektois parepidēmois diasporas)

εκλεκτοις – chosen out, elect, choice, select

παρεπιδημοις – sojourning in a strange place, ‘one who comes from a foreign country into a city or land to reside there by the side of the natives’ (Thayer)

διασπορας – scattering of seed, scattering of Jews into Gentile nations, dispersion of Jews

We would expect Peter, an apostle to the circumcision (Jews – Galatians 2; Acts 15), to write his letter(s) to Jews even as we would expect Paul, the apostle to the uncircumcision (Gentiles – Galatians 2; Acts 15), to write his letters primarily to Gentiles.

The author of 1 Peter addressed the issue of how these believing Jews should behave in foreign countries.

“Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether

to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men— as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.” 1 Peter 2:11-17

The author calls himself a ‘fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ’ (1 Peter 5:1). We know from the Gospels and Acts that Peter was both an elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ.

The author wrote at the end of the letter that ‘Silvanus, our faithful brother’ helped write the letter. We know from Acts 15 that Silvanus (also known as Silus) was one of the Jewish members of the Jerusalem church who accompanied Paul and Barnabas to deliver the council’s letter to the Gentile believers in Antioch. Silvanus (Silas) would have been someone Peter knew well.

The author also mentioned 'Mark my son' at the end of the letter. We know from Acts 12 that Peter visited the house of Mark's mother. We also know from Acts that Peter knew Barnabas well (Acts 4; 11; 15) and that Mark was Barnabas' cousin (Colossians 4:10).

The internal evidence seems to point to the Apostle Peter as the author, but what about external evidence?

External Evidence

Several leaders in the early Church either quoted from or mentioned 1 Peter as being written by the Apostle Peter.

“... and 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 ...”

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chapter IX.2

“And for this reason Peter says ‘that we have not liberty as a cloak of maliciousness,’ but as the means of testing and evidencing faith.” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chapter XVI.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.’” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V, Chapter VII.2

“Accordingly, Peter says, “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.” Origen, Against Celsus, Book VIII

“For occasionally the mind, when watchful, and casting away from it what is evil, calls to itself the aid of the good; or if it be, on the contrary, negligent and slothful, it makes room through insufficient caution for these spirits, which, lying in wait secretly like robbers, contrive to rush into the minds of men when they see a lodgment made for them by sloth; as the Apostle Peter says, ‘that our adversary the devil goes about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.’” Origen, de Principiis Book III

“Wherefore also Peter says: ‘Laying therefore aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisy, and envy, and evil speaking, as new-born babes, desire the milk of the word, that ye may grow by it to salvation; if ye have tasted that the Lord is Christ.’” Clement of Alexandria, Book I – Paedagogus (The Instructor), Chapter VI

“For,’ says Peter, ‘the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries.”
Clement of Alexandria, Book III – Paedagogus (The Instructor), Chapter XI

“Besides, Peter says, “Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house;” meaning the place of the angelic abode, guarded in heaven. “For you,” he says, “who are kept by the power of God, by faith and contemplation, to receive the end of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Clement of Alexandria, Fragments, I

“Was it because Christ was both a rock and a stone? For we read of His being placed “for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence.” Tertullian, Against Marcion Book IV, Chapter XIII

“Even as also the Apostle Peter laid down, saying, ‘Thus also shall baptism in like manner make you safe.’”
Cyprian, Epistle LXXIV

“But he follows Christ who stands in His precepts, who walks in the way of His teaching, who follows His footsteps and His ways, who imitates that which Christ both did and taught; in accordance with what Peter also exhorts and warns, saying, “Christ suffered for us, leaving you an example that ye should follow His steps.” Cyprian, Treatise X On Jealousy and Envy

“One epistle of Peter, that called the first, is acknowledged as genuine. And this the ancient elders used freely in their own writings as an undisputed work.” Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 3

There may also be parallels to some of the text in 1 Peter in some of these early Church writings:

- Epistle to the Corinthians, Clement of Rome
- Barnabas and Hermas, Ignatius
- The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians, Polycarp
- On Prayer, Tertullian
- De Corona, Tertullian
- Epistle of Ignatius to the Antiochians, Ignatius

- The Instructor Book III, Clement of Alexandria
- Against Heresies Book I, Irenaeus
- Cyprian Epistles LXXIII & LXXV, Cyprian
- Epistle of Ignatius to the Antiochians, Ignatius

The external evidence seems to point to the Apostle Peter as the author.

Language and Style

One of the arguments against the Apostle Peter writing 1 Peter is that Peter was an illiterate fisherman who wouldn't have strong Greek writing skills.

There does not seem to be a strong argument that Peter was illiterate. He ran a fishing business in Galilee that included doing business with people of different ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Greeks, Romans and Jews). We also have the author's own words that "By Silvanus, our faithful brother as I consider him, I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God in which you stand" (1 Peter 5:12). We know from Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Thessalonians that Silvanus traveled with him into Greek territories. Silvanus could certainly have taken Peter's words and written them in the Greek language.

Content

The comparison of content between 1 Peter and 2 Peter is one of the reasons that some scholars do not believe that the Apostle Peter wrote 2 Peter.

2 Peter

Internal Evidence

The author identifies himself as ‘Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ.’ However, the difference in writing style and Greek usage is one internal problem with accepting 2 Peter as written by the apostle.

One explanation is that Peter used an amanuenses (secretary e.g. Silvanus) to write 1 Peter, but wrote 2 Peter himself. Another explanation is that Peter used different amanuenses for each letter, though 2 Peter doesn't mention the author using a secretary.

The author identified the letter as the second one he had written.

“Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior.” 2 Peter 3:1-2

In addition to identifying himself as the Apostle Peter, the author also mentioned a situation that Peter would have experienced personally as an eyewitness to Jesus’ earthly ministry.

“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’ And we heard this voice which

came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.” 2 Peter 1:16-18

The author also expressed an understanding that his death was close, which might fit with the apostle’s personal situation.

“For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth. Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease.” 2 Peter 1:12-15

External Evidence

While there is not a lot of external evidence for the Apostle Peter being the author of 2 Peter, there may be parallels to some of the text in these early Church writings:

- Stromata Book I, Clement of Alexandria
- 1 Clement, Clement of Rome
- An Answer to the Jews, Tertullian
- Against Heresies Book V, Irenaeus

Some of the early Church fathers, including Jerome, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, Augustine, and Gregory of Nazianus, supported the belief that the Apostle Peter wrote 2 Peter.

Some of the early Church fathers, including Origen of Alexandria, Cheltenham, and Eusebius, disputed Peter's authorship of 2 Peter.

Atheist's Conclusion

My conclusion as an atheist at the time of my investigation was that while there was sufficient internal and external evidence to support the Apostle Peter authoring 1 Peter, there was not enough evidence to support the Apostle Peter authoring 2 Peter.

[I now accept Petrine authorship of 2 Peter based on further study of the New Testament since becoming a Christian, but this series is about my conclusions as an atheist in 1971.]

Next Time

In the next part of my report I will look at the evidence for the authenticity of epistles written by the Apostle John.

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