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Reflections on the Authorship of 2 Peter

This article by the Assistant Professor of New Testament in Providence College, Manitoba, Canada, is concerned with the general issues that arise in determining the authorship of New Testament books, using 2 Peter as a specific example of the difficulties in doing so.

Key words: Bible; New Testament; authorship; 2 Peter.

This paper[1] is neither a defence of nor challenge to the apostolic authorship of 2 Peter. Rather it is an evaluation of various arguments used in the authorship debate on both sides of the issue. Uncertainty about the origin of this epistle has been a concern at least since the second century. What is interesting however is that those defending the traditional view and those positing some form of non-Petrine production often use similar arguments to prove their case. This paper will examine methodological issues related to authorship questions and suggest that certain lines of argument, rather than providing clarity, tend to cloud the issue.

Origen (ca.185-252) provides the earliest evidence that the authorship of 2 Peter was questioned (though it seems that he himself accepted a Petrine origin for this epistle[2]):

> Peter, on whom the Church of Christ is built, against which the gates of Hades shall not prevail, has left one acknowledged epistle, and, it may be, a second also; for it is doubted.[3]

Eusebius (ca.265-340) also had doubts.

> Of Peter, one epistle, that which is called his first, is admitted, and the ancient presbyters used this in their own writings as unquestioned, but the so-called second Epistle we have not received as canonical, but nevertheless it has appeared useful to many, and has been studied with the other Scriptures.[4]

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1 I would like to express my thanks to the Association of Canadian Bible Colleges for both a research grant and a forum to discuss some of the ideas found in this paper. An earlier version of it was presented at their annual meeting in May, 2000 (Three Hills, Alberta). The views presented here are of course my own and are not necessarily shared by members of that association.

2 *Hom. in Josh.* 7.1.

3 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.7-8.

4 *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.1.

> Now the above are the books bearing the name of Peter, of which I recognize only one as genuine and admitted by the presbyters of old.[5]
>
> Of the Disputed Books which are nevertheless known to most are the Epistle called of James, that of Jude, the second Epistle of Peter, and the so-called second and third Epistles of John . . . .[6]

Modern New Testament (NT) scholarship has continued to be suspicious about whether the Apostle Peter himself was responsible for this letter. This suspicion is so firmly entrenched that it is conventional in commentaries and introductions to say something like 'scholarship is almost unanimous in the opinion that 2 Peter is pseudepigraphal.'[7] Why '*almost*'? There are of course a minority of scholars who argue that the case for pseudepigraphy is not as air-tight as it is usually made out to be.[8] And so the debate – familiar to Ori-

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5 *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.4.

6 *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.3.

7 For confident assertions that Peter could not be responsible for this epistle, see e.g. W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. H. C. Kee (rev. and enlarged ed.; Nashville, 1975), 430-34, and J. H. Elliott, 'Peter, Second Epistle of', in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman, et al. (New York, 1992), 5:282-87. A. Lindemann finds that 'die Kennzeichen der Pseudonymität sind besonders deutlich' (*Paulus im ältesten Christentum: Das Bild des Apostels und die Rezeption der paulinischen Theologie in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Marcion* [BHT 58; Tübingen, 1979], 91; supported by reference to 1:16-18 and 3:1). In D. G. Meade's opinion, '[n]o document included in the NT gives such thorough evidence of its pseudonymity as does 2 Peter. The arguments against authenticity are overwhelming' (*Pseudonymity and Canon: An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition* [Grand Rapids, 1986], 179). Raymond Brown finds that 'the pseudonymity of II Pet is more certain than that of any other NT work' (*An Introduction to the New Testament* [ABRL; New York, 1997], 767). Speaking of the scholarly consensus that 2 Peter is pseudepigraphal, R. J. Bauckham observes that 'only a few recent discussions of the work still dissent' ('2 Peter', in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, ed. R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids [Downers Grove, Ill., 1997], 924).

8 Among recent writers challenging the consensus view are J. D. Charles in his *Virtue amidst Vice: The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter 1* (JSNTSup 150; Sheffield, 1997). Charles offers a spirited response to the almost unanimous consensus that 2 Peter is a pseudepigraphal testament (esp. 49-75; cf. 128-30). He recapitulates the findings of earlier scholarship and takes their arguments further, building heavily on ethical objections to the practice of pseudepigraphy in the early church (49-75). His conclusion in this study remains cautious: 'In the end, the testamental hypothesis, which has been broadly accepted as an interpretive framework for understanding 2 Peter, may be judged to be possible – and this with certain highly restricted qualifications – but by no means conclusive, in spite of arguments to the contrary' (75). Elsewhere Charles states his view more directly: 'That 2 Peter, in the end, has achieved universal acceptance (and thus canonicity) reflects acknowledgment both of its apostolic content as well as apostolic authorship' (E. Waltner and J. D. Charles, *1-2 Peter, Jude* [Believers Church Bible Commentary; Scottdale, Pa., 1999], 263). Others have argued the case for the Petrine origin of 2 Peter, e.g.: C. Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*

gen – continues, with arguments both for and against being lined up side-by-side. It seems unlikely that a consensus will ever be reached.

In the following pages there is no attempt to introduce new data or weigh in on the debate either way. What the following comments are concerned with is *methodology* and the *types* of arguments brought into the discussion. To show my hand from the outset, it appears to me that many of the 'clues' introduced to the debate to prove one way or the other the provenance of this document do not allow for firm historical conclusions.

I. An analogous debate

Who wrote the great literature attributed to William Shakespeare? Was it in fact Shakspere[9] of Stratford-upon-Avon? The author of the plays and poems demonstrated remarkable intellect but Shakespeare of Stratford did not, by all appearances, have the advantage of an extensive education. Also, how could a 'commoner' have had such command of life in aristocratic circles? Perhaps readers should look beyond Shakespeare of Stratford, about whom so little is known, to contemporaries like Francis Bacon or Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. In the case of such candidates, their education and experience would – as the argument goes – better account for the literature.

This type of reasoning is very familiar to biblical scholars. Attempts to unveil an otherwise murky background of certain pieces of literature turn to clues within the text thought to reveal such things as the identity of the author, the time and place of writing, and the

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(ICC; Edinburgh, 1901), 242-47 and throughout; J. J. Lias, 'The Genuineness of the Second Epistle of St. Peter', *BSac* 70, 1913, 599-606; E. A. Blum, '2 Peter', in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelein, et al. (Grand Rapids, 1981), 12:257-61; B. C. Caffin, 'The Second Epistle General of Peter', in *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and J. S. Exell (reprint, Grand Rapids, 1983), esp. i-xiii; M. Green, *2 Peter and Jude* (TNTC; Leicester, 1987), 39 (assumed 'provisionally,' 39); S. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and of the Epistle of Jude* (NTC; Grand Rapids, 1987), 213-19; D. J. Moo, *2 Peter and Jude* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, 1996), 21-26; and most recently M. J. Kruger, 'The Authenticity of 2 Peter', *JETS* 42, 1999, 645-71. Cf. J. R. Michael's thesis discussed below.

9 Apparently those involved in the authorship debate have conventionally distinguished the man 'Shakspere' (a common spelling of his name) – one among many candidates for authorship – from Shakespeare, the one responsible for the literature in question. 'Traditionalists' of course would argue that these are one and the same. 'Heretics' (so-called by traditionalists) disagree with this conclusion and have put forward numerous other candidates believed to be Shakespeare. This distinction in name is not maintained here and 'Shakespeare' will be used consistently from this point on.

intended audience. In both English literary scholarship and the study of 2 Peter there is also a name given in the text. Traditionalists (supporters of William Shakespeare of Stratford and the Apostle Peter) take the autograph in the text as a logical starting point. Those who question the given signature are accused of appealing to a conspiracy of sorts. Either an aristocrat or someone of high standing hid behind a pseudonym in order to avoid a scandalous association with the theatre or, in the biblical example, a later writer had to appeal to apostolic authority in order to have his message heard and heeded.[10]

My interest in this analogy stems largely from John Michell's fascinating summary of the Shakespeare question in his book *Who Wrote Shakespeare?* His treatment is largely descriptive; recognizing that firm conclusions are impossible, he approaches the subject with the goal of describing and even enjoying the debate. After all, in his words, '[e]verything that can possibly be said by all sides has already been said, and still the mystery remains. Unless some new, dramatically conclusive piece of evidence turns up, the whole subject looks to be approaching a dead end.'[11]

Will NT scholars on either side of the 2 Peter authorship debate ever be content to say something similar? Likely not. For some, there is too much at stake in giving up the attempt to defend or prove Petrine authorship (the traditionalist position). Those holding the majority view (namely that 2 Peter is not from Peter's pen) will argue that the text can only be understood properly once its pseudonymous nature has been recognized. Biblical and Shakespearean scholars will certainly continue to wrestle with these authorship questions because, in both examples, there is insufficient data to allow a final word on the matter in favour of any one theory. Furthermore, such topics are endlessly fascinating. Since the debate over the origin of 2 Peter will continue, there are a few areas of methodology that need to be considered.

II. What's the problem? Ten reasons why Petrine authorship of 2 Peter is questioned

Before proceeding, I offer a greatly oversimplified review of the types of concerns that raise doubts about apostolic authorship of this epis-

10 This is not a perfect analogy of course. The traditionalists in Shakespeare studies – I assume – are in the majority whereas the traditionalists in 2 Peter studies are not. The intention here is simply to provide a heuristic device for reflection on authorship debates.

11 J. Michell, *Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (London, 1996), 10.

tle in the first place.[12] For one thing, (1) 2 Peter's relation to Jude needs to be considered. It is beyond dispute that some literary relationship exists between these letters and most commentators conclude that Peter is the borrower.[13] A date for Jude is as difficult to determine as it is for 2 Peter; generally it is thought to have been written after 70 C.E.[14] which, if true, would put 2 Peter to a period after Peter's death (which was, according to tradition, in the mid 60s C.E.).[15] It may also be important to ask whether a 'pillar' in the early church would make use of Jude who was not an apostle. Next, (2) connections to 1 Peter may or may not be relevant. Differences in style between 1 and 2 Peter suggest that these two documents were written by different authors.[16] Furthermore, (3) reference to Paul's letters as Scripture[17] may point to a later period of the church's history as also the reference to the apostles as long in the past (3:2, 4). This speaks against a time of writing when many of them were still living. (4) There is a conspicuous emphasis on Peter-as-author which, it has been argued, indicates efforts to hide a forgery (so Lindemann; see n.7). (5) The author seems at home in a Hellenistic religious and philosophical context; this is far removed from the Peter known from the Gospels. (6) There was a wide tradition of pseudonymous writings using Peter's name meaning that it would not be unusual to understand 2 Peter as another example of this (even if it is earlier in date than the others). (7) A concern with proper interpretation of Scripture and a high regard for apostolic tradition suggests greater similarity with the emerging catholicism of the second century than with the young faith evidenced by the earliest NT writings. (8) Second Peter is poorly attested in the second century and, related to this, (9) the church was reluctant to accept this document into its canon – a fact that speaks against apostolic authorship. (10) And per-

12 For more details, see the studies listed in notes 7 and 8. Also helpful for summarizing the issues related to authorship and dating is R. A. Bouchat, *Dating the Second Epistle of Peter* (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1992).

13 Though cf. Moo, 16-18. The most comprehensive case for 2 Peter's priority remains that put forward by Bigg.

14 One indication of this later date is found in vv.17-18 where the author speaks of the apostles in the past tense.

15 Cf. *1 Clem.* 5.

16 Though this does not indicate very much if, as is often the case, 1 Peter is also assumed to be pseudepigraphal. On the other hand, even if Petrine authorship is accepted for these letters, variety in style may be explained by the use of an amanuensis (see 1 Pet. 5:12). This explanation was first suggested by Jerome (*Ep. Hed.* 120.9). Cf. G. K. Barr ('The Structure of Hebrews and 1st and 2nd Peter', *Irish Biblical Studies* 19, 1997, 17-31) who proposes that a common secretary may have been associated with Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter.

17 2 Pet. 3:15-16.

haps the most significant argument is that of genre. Second Peter has been identified as a testament, a farewell discourse. In many instances such literature is clearly pseudonymous in nature.[18]

These familiar arguments are clearly not all of equal weight. One's final conclusion often rests on an evaluation of the scruples involved in pseudepigraphy and the concomitant issue of whether pseudonymity is compatible with canonicity. From this sweeping overview of the problem we now move to more specific themes that appear in the debate.

III. Some dead ends in authorship debates

It is suggested that theories of authorship – both sides of the debate – are weakened to the extent that there is dependence on any of the following as evidence.

1. Claims arguing that authors were or were not capable of the literature being considered

This line of argumentation is central to the Shakespeare debate as noted already. It has been observed that the writer behind the works attributed to William Shakespeare had extensive knowledge of such diverse topics as sports, the Bible, English and European history, classical literature and languages, Italian geography, horticulture, music, astronomy and astrology, medicine and psychology, navigation and seamanship, Cambridge University jargon, and freemasonry, to name but a few. Consider these general comments on this range of knowledge:

> As a complete, all-inclusive account of nature and humanity, Shakespeare's works have been compared to the Bible. Their author, it is said, was a Universal Man, certainly the greatest mind of his time, not just an inspired poet but a master of all knowledge. Professionals in many fields have written monographs, showing from detailed references in the plays and poems that Shakespeare was a master of their own particular craft, infallible in its jargon and technical language. The arts and sciences were all within his grasp; he wrote about them fluently and gracefully; his learning was governed by the highest philosophy and, above all else, he was a constitutional expert with profound knowledge of the law.[19]

Not surprisingly, when what little is known about William Shakespeare of Stratford is compared with these impressive credentials,

18 E.g., The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. A. Chester and R. P. Martin suggest that the genre of 2 Peter is among the clearest indications of a post-Petrine setting (*The Theology of the Letters of James, Peter, and Jude* [NTT; Cambridge, 1994], 139). Similarly, see Bauckham, '2 Peter', 924.

19 Michell, 17. For a more thorough list of Shakespeare's 'specialties', see *ibid.*, 18.

questions are raised. How can he have known all of this? At the same time, defenders of the traditional position think the whole issue is overstated. In one case the following response is put forward:

> Because Shakespeare never went to university, much is made – too much, in fact – of the termination of his formal schooling with grammar school. The idea that the greatest playwright of the human race could have poured forth such a cornucopia of genius with only the benefit of a grammar school education does seem to stretch stupefaction past the point of credulity. But the objection ignores both the intensely classical curriculum of Stratford's 'grammar' school (which, unlike our modern counterpart, stretched well into a boy's fifteenth or sixteenth year) and Shakespeare's years of young adulthood working as a schoolmaster for a wealthy Catholic family in Lancashire, when he had ample opportunity to expand his reading and activate, as a teacher, his passively absorbed pupil's learning.[20]

Here we have illustrated two positions, both based on guesswork. There are too many variables involved, however, to finally reach a conclusion: Was William Shakespeare a precocious child or not? (How can we know?) Was William Shakespeare an avid reader or not (assuming here that he had access to a wide range of books)? (How can we know?)

Similar issues are raised when we turn to the biblical text. How is it possible that the Jewish, Galilean fisherman known to us from the Gospels was responsible for a document rich with Hellenistic concepts and vocabulary? In Werner Kümmel's words,

> The conceptual world and the rhetorical language [of 2 Peter] are so strongly influenced by Hellenism as to rule out Peter definitely [as author], nor could it have been written by one of his helpers or pupils under instructions from Peter. Not even at some time after the death of the apostle.[21]

Traditionalists often answer the charge by observing that there was a considerable amount of time between our first glimpse of Peter in the Gospels and the time 2 Peter was written (approximately 30 years; tradition places Peter's death to the reign of Nero who committed suicide in 68 C.E.). Moo for one writes that '[t]he Greek of 2 Peter has an undeniably literary and even philosophical flavor, quite different from the Greek of 1 Peter [but] there is nothing in the letter

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20 E. T. Oakes, 'Shakespeare's Millennium', *First Things* 98 (1999), 17-18.

21 Kümmel, 432. Among Hellenistic concepts listed are: the *aretē* of God (1:3); virtue in addition to faith (1:5); the emphasis on the theme of knowledge; participation in the divine nature *theias koinōnoi phuseōs* as an escape from the corruption in the world (1:4); the term *epoptai*(1:16); and the presence of a Hellenistic proverb in 2:22. For more detailed discussion about the Hellenism of 2 Peter, see T. Fornberg, *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society: A Study of 2 Peter* (ConBNT 5; Lund, 1972), and Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice.*

that Peter, after many years of ministry in the Greek world, could not have written.'[22] Also, it is possible that Peter was adapting his language to suit the religious and cultural milieu of his readers.[23] Finally, the role of an amanuensis has often been proposed as a partial explanation though this solution is not without its difficulties.[24]

This line of argumentation is insufficient to support or challenge the traditional authorship view. We know very little about Peter's life apart from a handful of stories recorded by early Christian writers. Regarding his educational opportunities and his intellectual abilities, we can only speculate.[25] Galilee was indeed culturally diverse, and there was widespread use of Greek, and so it is possible that Peter could have produced this letter. However, it is best to admit our limitations in this area.

2. *The search for a* terminus ad quem

There is no doubt that 2 Peter was written before 200 C.E., this date based on the third-century Bodmer P72 and Origen's knowledge of this epistle. Can this date be lowered? It can if earlier texts are found to be dependent on 2 Peter. Robert Picirilli has attempted to show this in his study of parallels between 2 Peter and the Apostolic Fathers. In his view, the former was likely an influence on the latter. His conclusions remain tentative however: 'One thing has been proved, even if negative: one *cannot* dogmatically affirm that there *certainly* are not allusions to 2 Peter in the Apostolic Fathers.'[26] Such a conclusion is of limited value though because historians need to work with probabilities, not possibilities. His study offers a variety of parallels between this canonical and noncanonical literature but without explicit reference to a source or lengthy passages of common material, proof of 2 Peter's influence is impossible to find.[27] Further-

22 Moo, 24.

23 See e.g., *ibid.*, 24, 26; D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (rev. ed.; Downers Grove, Ill., 1990), 763-64; and Blum, 257-61.

24 Cf. 1 Pet. 5:12. Regarding the role of the amanuensis, R. N. Longenecker points out that the extent to which secretaries had freedom in drafting personal letters is 'beyond determination from the evidence presently at hand, and may well have varied from case to case' ('Ancient Amanuenses and the Pauline Epistles', in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney [Grand Rapids, 1974], 288). See too Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice*, 60-63.

25 Use of the term *agrammatos* in the description of Peter and John in Acts 4:13 likely refers to their lack of religious training, not their education in general.

26 R. E. Picirilli, 'Allusions to 2 Peter in the Apostolic Fathers', *JSNT* 33 (1998), 74 (his emphasis).

27 He admits that absolute proof is not attainable, e.g., 'The possibility clearly exists that 2 Peter is reflected in several passages in the Apostolic Fathers. There is certainly enough in common for that, even though this is not proof that conscious quotations exist' (*ibid.*).

more, the aim of this study – searching second-century literature for a *terminus ad quem* earlier than Origen (the first to refer to 2 Peter by name) – would offer little to the authorship debate anyway. Picirilli explicitly refers to himself as a conservative by which I assume he means that he holds to a traditional view of authorship. His line of argument then is an attempt to push the *terminus ad quem* to an earlier period, thus bolstering the case for the traditional view.[28] It is not clear, however, how this helps establish Petrine authorship. After all, Peter died in the 60s and so tracing Peter's influence on Christian writings after this time (late first, second century) does not help. A pseudepigraphal letter could have been written at any point (even during Peter's own lifetime) and indeed many proponents of a first-century date for this epistle still maintain that it was not written by the apostle (e.g., in addition to Bauckham, Bo Reicke and Robert Bouchat).[29] The limited value of seeking allusions to 2 Peter in second-century texts as a proof of Petrine authorship was observed by Donald Guthrie who points out that 'such evidence would not, of course, rule out the possibility that 2 Peter was a non-authentic work, but the nearer the attestation is traced back towards the first century, the greater is the presumption against this.'[30] I agree completely with the first half of this sentence but not the second. Again, it is not clear how earlier attestation in the period after Peter's death makes any difference in this discussion. Paul expressed concern about people writing in his name while he was still alive![31] The search for an earlier *terminus ad quem* provides no evidence to support the traditional view. At the same time, observing parallels with other literature does little to threaten it either, and this leads into my next point.

3. The search for the milieu in which 2 Peter was written

Under this heading I treat two distinguishable themes at the same

28 This line of argumentation is common among those defending traditional authorship. For a recent example, see Kruger, 649-56.

29 Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude* (AB; New York, 1964), 144-45; Bouchat, esp. 235-38. Bauckham (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 157-58) also finds the evidence to indicate a first-century date 'though . . . an early second-century date cannot be entirely excluded.' He has argued that 2 Peter was a source for the Apocalypse of Peter, a(n early?) second-century pseudepigraphon. He suggests that the Apocalypse was written during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-35 C.E.) but before its conclusion. For the date of the Apocalypse see 'The Apocalypse of Peter: A Jewish Christian Apocalypse from the Time of Bar Kokhba', *Apocrypha* 5 (1994), 7-111. He argues that this document was dependent on 2 Peter in '2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter', in his *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (NovTSup 93; Leiden, 1998), 290-303.

30 Guthrie, 810-11.

31 2 Thes. 2:1-2.

time, literary parallels (such as shared vocabulary and imagery[32]) and general theological perspective. What is of interest here is the attempt to answer historical questions by observing similarities between a text of unknown historical location and a text (or texts) of known historical location. In the two examples of authorship studies considered here, references to parallels have been introduced as evidence. It is often argued that observing parallels or identifying a theological perspective can help pinpoint a geographical or chronological context, or perhaps even identify authorship. For example, shifting back to the Shakespeare question:

> A great deal of Baconian scholarship has been devoted to parallelisms – thoughts, phrases, and expressions which occur in the writings of both Shakespeare and Bacon. . . . The Baconian conclusion is that Bacon compiled *The Promus* [Bacon's own manuscript notes in which many parallels with Shakespeare can be found] as a source-book for his Shakespearian and other writings. The Orthodox [traditionalist] arguments against Proof by Parallel Passages are: that Shakespeare and Bacon could have taken similar phrases from the same Biblical, classical and other published sources; that they could have borrowed from each other, and that many of their shared expressions were commonplaces at the time.[33]

In this case, there is the implied assumption that if there are similarities between writings there must logically be a direct correspondence.

In our NT example, this type of evidence for specific locations is frequently called upon. Common authorship has actually been suggested as an explanation for the similarities between Jude and 2

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32 Parallels between biblical and non-biblical literature are frequently introduced in research for a variety of reasons and the temptation to draw extravagant conclusions from them is great. For methodological considerations regarding parallels see M. E. Boring, K. Berger, and C. Colpe, eds., *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament*, trans. M. E. Boring (Nashville, 1995), 11-32; A. Deissmann, *Light From the Ancient Near East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. L. R. M. Strachan ([1927] repr., Peabody, Mass, 1995), 265-67; T. L. Donaldson, 'Parallels: Use, Misuse and Limitations', *EvQ* 55 (1983), 193-210; C. A. Evans, R. L. Webb, and R. A. Wiebe, eds., *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible* (Leiden, 1993), xviii-xxii; E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, 1993), 1-3; B. M. Metzger, 'Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity', in *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish and Christian* (Leiden, 1968), 1-24; S. Sandmel, 'Parallelomania', JBL 81 (1962), 1-13; and D. Stoutenburg, *With One Voice / B'Qol Echad: The Sermon on the Mount and Rabbinic Literature* (San Francisco, 1996), 81-87.

33 Michell, 156.

Peter.[34] Others are concerned to find a specific historical location for 2 Peter such as a geographical setting or date of composition.

a. Literary parallels

How are literary parallels used in historical research? One example is given here. Richard Bauckham's formulation of the Roman provenance hypothesis represents an impressive attempt to locate this document in history. He begins with a strong presentation of the case for pseudonymous authorship, one that builds heavily on the issue of genre. Second Peter is a farewell discourse or testament and '[i]n Jewish usage the testament was a *fictional* literary genre.'[35] From this he attempts to determine the approximate time and place of writing, presenting a strong case for associating this epistle with the Roman church at the end of the first or early second century. In support of

34 J. A. T. Robinson argues that Jude's desire to write to the readers about their common salvation was interrupted by a crisis requiring a more hurried written response (vv.3-4). 'I suggest that what he was composing in the name of the apostle was II Peter' (*Redating the New Testament* [London, 1976], 193). Jude represents the shorter, hurried work prepared to meet the immediate crisis. T. V. Smith comments: 'This hypothesis [i.e., common authorship] would account very well for both the limited amount of close verbal agreement and the close similarity of theme and content: the writer used different words to talk about the same thing. In addition, 2 Peter's puzzling omissions would be explained, for there would be little need to repeat everything already contained in the first letter [i.e., Jude, which is referred to in 2 Pet. 3:1]. Why, however, on this hypothesis, did the author need to write both Jude and then 2 Peter?' (*Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity: Attitudes Towards Peter in Christian Writings of the First Two Centuries* [WUNT 15; Tübingen, 1985], 77).

35 Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 134 (his emphasis). This is carefully defined (see esp. 131-35, 158-62 but also throughout). Bauckham maintains that the alternation between future and present is a deliberate attempt to demonstrate how the apostolic predictions are being fulfilled with the coming of false teachers in the readers' day (see e.g., *ibid.*, 239). This indicates that Petrine authorship is a fiction that the real author does not consistently carry through. Bauckham is not convinced that the author would inadvertently slip from future to present tense because this document shows signs of being carefully written. Allowing all of this, he concludes that Petrine authorship represents a 'transparent fiction' that readers would readily recognize (the most complete argument is in *ibid.*, 131-63, but see also the brief summary in Bauckham, '2 Peter', 924). I. H. Marshall's review of his theory of authorship is quite interesting. It illustrates a cautious but open-minded reaction by one conservative: 'Various pieces of evidence indicate that the letter is not in fact by Peter but emanates from the church at Rome and was motivated by pastoral concern for other churches. Understood in this way pseudonymity is compatible with canonicity since in this case the device is "not a fraudulent means of claiming apostolic authority, but embodies a claim to be a faithful mediator of the apostolic message" ([Bauckham] 161f.). If this concept of a non-fraudulent use of the literary genre is defensible, then it is clear that evangelical Christians need not react against the possibility that 2 Peter was not written by Peter' (review of *Jude, 2 Peter*, by R. J. Bauckham, in *EvQ* 57 (1985), 78).

this conclusion, Bauckham notes the many similarities – parallels – between literature associated with Rome during this period (1 and 2 *Clement*, the Shepherd of Hermas) and 2 Peter.[36]

b. Theological outlook

Another example of this concern to locate 2 Peter on the basis of parallels builds on perceived differences between this epistle and Paul and affinities between 2 Peter and second-century theology and ecclesiology. The term 'early catholicism' is a label given to texts thought to reflect a later period of the church's development. Some argue that features of late second-century catholicism are found in the NT itself.[37] Among characteristics of this later stage of Christian history often said to appear in the NT, even if in an incipient form, are a declining expectation of Christ's imminent return, increasing institutionalization of the church, and the reduction of the Christian message into established forms. The term *Frühkatholizismus* (early catholicism) suggests that the process leading to these developments is either understood as a falling away from the earliest gospel or, more positively, as the coming to light of what was implicit in the NT itself.[38]

Ernst Käsemann (1906-1998) is often introduced in treatments of early catholicism, especially with respect to 2 Peter.[39] According to Käsemann various indicators point to a late date for 2 Peter. To give but one example, an issue confronting Christians early on in the church's history was the delay of Christ's second coming. The original readers of 2 Peter 'were embarrassed and disturbed by the fact of the delay of the Parousia, a fact naturally used by the adversaries to

36 On this, see especially his *Jude, 2 Peter*, 149-51.

37 For a thorough discussion of the issue see J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Enquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (2d ed.; London, 1990), ch. 14.

38 *Ibid.*, 341. For a presentation of the latter perspective and for further discussion of the twentieth-century interest in this issue, see J. H. Elliott, 'A Catholic Gospel: Reflections on "Early Catholicism" in the New Testament', *CBQ* 31 (1969), 213-23.

39 A recent tribute to Ernst Käsemann provides a fascinating introduction to the life and thought of this important NT theologian and is highly recommended (P. F. M. Zahl, 'A Tribute to Ernst Käsemann And a Theological Testament', *Anglican Theological Review* 80 [1998], 382-94). The term 'early catholicism' did not originate with Käsemann. Use of the term *Frühkatholizismus* actually goes back to F. C. Baur in the nineteenth century (R. P. Martin, 'Early Catholicism', in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne and R. P. Martin [Downers Grove, Ill., 1993], 223) though some suggest it was first used by W. Heitmüller or E. Troeltsch (K. H. Neufeld, "Frühkatholizismus' – Idee und Begriff', ZKT 94 [1972], 1-28 [this reference taken from Martin]). The study in which Käsemann presents his position on 2 Peter is his 'An Apologia for Primitive Christian Eschatology', in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia, 1982), 169-95.

bolster up their argument', and in fact this letter was intended to provide a defence of the primitive hope.[40]

Two examples have been given. The first proposed a geographical provenance for 2 Peter and an approximate date on the basis of literary parallels with the extant writings of the Roman church produced in the late first through the mid second century. The second was more theological in nature, building on assumptions about the development of the early church. For various reasons though, such attempts to locate texts on the basis of affinities with and divergence from other literature may be deceptive. For one thing, it is easy to overlook the role of the author as a creative, original thinker. It is not necessarily true that an author is a mirror image of his or her environment. Naturally a writer speaks the language of the intended audience and as much as possible will make contact with experiences familiar to them in order to gain a hearing[41] but it does not necessarily follow that everything written automatically represents the views held by the intended community or the cultural background of the author. To illustrate, if a Jewish author chose to write to a Gentile audience (as traditionalists would argue is the case for 2 Peter), it is not surprising that the writer would attempt to 'speak their language.' We need only think of Paul's Areopagus address to see this phenomenon illustrated in the NT.[42]

Furthermore, there is often inadequate attention given to the possibility that a document may have *contributed* to the shape of the environment in which it is said to be located. For example, are similarities between the thought of 2 Peter and second-century (early catholic) tendencies to be explained as 2 Peter belonging to that context, or was that context shaped in part by (the earlier) 2 Peter?

Finally, authors may deliberately seek to blur an obvious link to a given context for various reasons: they may attempt to create the impression that their writing derives from a different setting (see any example of historical fiction); they may depict their environment as they wish it was (e.g., apocalyptic literature with its depiction of justice for the oppressed); they may provide a description of their contemporary setting that is only partially correct and mixed with exaggerations in order to create satire; they may deliberately distort aspects of their context as a polemic, and so on.

It is extremely difficult to measure such variables as these. Apart from the limited information available about the early centuries of the church, it would appear that one of the greatest weaknesses in

40 Käsemann, 170.
41 See 2 Pet. 1:1, 12-13; 3:1.
42 Acts 17:16-34.

attempts to locate texts on the basis of parallels or perceived differences between texts is the idiosyncrasies of authorship. Rarely do writers conform to the expectations placed on them so completely that individuality is lost.

4. Arguments from silence (the absence of parallels)

Why is it that virtually nothing is known about Shakespeare of Stratford? Public records that are reasonably expected have not been found. People one would expect to mention the man and his works do not do so (e.g., Philip Henslowe [owner and manager of the Rose and other playhouses], Edward Alleyne [Henslowe's son-in-law and business partner who mentions every notable actor and writer in Shakespeare's time, but not Shakespeare himself], Michael Drayton [an author who often mentioned other contemporary literary figures, but not Shakespeare]). Here again is an argument against the traditional view of authorship. How could William Shakespeare's brilliance not have been recognized? The reason is that the true author was hiding behind a pseudonym. This is of course an argument from silence.

But when, if ever, is the absence of parallels (or topics) significant in historical arguments? This question needs to be asked as it is often introduced in attempts to locate 2 Peter. Notice how the following examples from 2 Peter studies use arguments from silence to reach opposite conclusions:

> [in 2 Peter] traces of the second century are absent at those points where theymight have been confidently expected to occur . . .[43]

> . . . I am impressed by the absence of any suggestion of chiliasm in 3:8 when quoting the very verse used by Barnabas, Justin, 2 Clement, Methodius and Irenaeus to support it . . . . I am impressed by the absence of interest in church organization (one of the main preoccupations of second-century works like the *Didache* and the *Ascension of Isaiah*) . . .[44]

> To infer from the absence of any allusion to chiliasm that the epistle must be very old, is doubly erroneous; for (i.) chiliasm was not universal in the second century, (ii.) nor was the quotation from Ps 90:4 its starting-point, as Apoc 20:4f. is enough to show.[45]

> The letter gives no hint of a second-century environment or of problems such as the monarchical bishop, developed Gnosticism, or Montanism.[46]

> Indeed if this is the sort of thing that was being produced in the first half

43 Bigg, 242.
44 Green, 39.
45 J. Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* (International Theological Library; New York, 1911), 362 n.
46 Blum, 261.

> of the second century [referring to the *Apocalypse of Peter*] it is the strongest possible argument for *not* placing II Peter there.[47]
>
> To commentators, the use of the double name *Symeōn Petros* seems strange, as it occurs elsewhere only in Acts 15.14. It is noteworthy that 'Simon Peter' does not occur in any pseudo-Petrine writings of the second century.[48]
>
> . . . it should be noted how the predictive character of the testament genre is used in 2 Peter. Nothing in the letter reflects the situation in which Peter is said to be writing; the work is addressed to a situation after Peter's death.[49]
>
> . . . pseudepigraphic literature is normally connected to heretical groups. . . . [2 Peter] has no evident heterodoxical agenda, bears no clear resemblance to any other pseudo-Petrine literature, and exhibits no references to any second-century doctrinal controversies.[50]

Arguments based on the silence of the text can be used in diverse ways as can be seen from the examples given above. These illustrate how the absence of parallels is used to support opposite conclusions – 2 Peter *is* a second-century document and 2 Peter *is not* a second-century document. In these statements the authors are in each case correct in their observations. But what can these observations prove? Modern readers are not in the position to assert what an ancient writer could or could not do, would or would not do.[51]

5. Composite authorship theories

One final strategy for overcoming authorship questions is noted here. Composite authorship theories reduce the urgency to explain how a single writer can be responsible for diversity in literature. In the case of our English example, various candidates for the author-

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47 Robinson, 178 (his emphasis).

48 Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice*, 130.

49 Bauckham, '2 Peter', 924.

50 Kruger, 670.

51 A further example often cited in studies of 2 Peter involves the comparison with Jude. Much is made of the fact that 2 Peter does not include pseudepigraphal material to the same extent that Jude does. In fact, the author of 2 Peter seems to excise traces of this material quite deliberately (Jude 6 cf. 2 Pet. 2:4, 9; Jude 9 cf. 2 Pet. 2:11; Jude 14-15 cf. 2 Pet. 2:17). Does this say something about 2 Peter's intended audience? Maybe they were not familiar with these Jewish traditions, suggesting therefore a (primarily) Gentile readership. Or, does it say something about the date of composition? Perhaps it signals a later stage in the church's development when there was a reluctance to use pseudepigraphal writings (the Assumption of Moses, 1 Enoch). However, such reasoning reflects an oversimplified view of the early church. It is equally possible that *parts of the church* were uncomfortable with this literature (2 Peter) while other *parts of the church* felt free to make use of it (Jude).

ship of the plays and poems would nicely account for those specific areas of expertise thought to lie outside Shakespeare's ken. For this reason a variety of group theories have emerged. These provide an effective solution to the problem: 'Take all the candidates who have claims to some part of Shakespeare, and make them into a group with whoever you like as leader'.[52] The attraction of such theories is obvious – play around (pun intended) with enough names and you will eventually find a combination that will answer all the questions presented by the text. And so, as Michell points out, group theories provide an ideal answer to those doubting traditional authorship yet unable to support any of the other candidates put forward. However,

> . . . when it comes to specifying the group members, and rejecting other claimants, confusion sets in. Everyone has their own ideas about who should be allowed in or excluded, and no one has shown how even a small, dedicated group could have maintained such long-lasting secrecy.[53]

Consensus will never be achieved in such a scenario.

This is not a perfect analogy but similar theories appear in biblical studies, perhaps most often as some form of school hypothesis. In NT studies the Johannine literature especially has been treated in this way, but it has been applied to the Petrine literature as well.[54] Marion Soards points to literary similarities and dissimilarities in the documents which, he argues, are best explained if these texts were all written in and/or used by different people in one community. Along with liturgical features found in 1 Peter, 2 Peter and Jude, and similarities in theology and use of the OT, he also notes the shared use of

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52 Michell, 241. Michell provides a sampling of 14 examples of such group theories (see 241-46 for full discussion).

53 *Ibid.*, 245.

54 E.g., E. Best speaks of a Petrine school in his study of 1 Peter: 'We conclude that the epistle was pseudonymous but emerged from a Petrine school' (*1 Peter* [NCB; London, 1971], 63). Presumably 2 Peter was also a product of this school as it knew and used 1 Peter (63; cf. 44-45). Chase is also open to the school hypothesis; in his discussion of the similarities between 2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter he lists this as a possible explanation: 'Are the two documents the work of two writers who belonged to the same school, whose thoughts moved in the same directions, and to whom the same expressions and words had grown familiar? . . . The fact that there is a similarity between the two writings, not only in words or in definitely marked ideas, but also in general conceptions . . . seems to be an argument of some strength in favour of the view that the two documents are the product of the same school' (F. H. Chase, 'Peter, Second Epistle of', in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. J. Hastings [Edinburgh, 1898-1904], 3:816). Chester and Martin find that '2 Peter carries marks of having been composed by members of the "school of Peter" . . . at a time when Peter's memory was cherished and his aegis claimed for teaching required to repel rival teachers' (145) and again '[t]he author of 2 Peter was a devoted member of the Petrine school' (139; cf. 90-94). Brown maintains that the production of this text in Rome, in a Petrine school, is 'plausible' (768).

pseudepigraphy and source material (among other things).[55] While this is an intriguing hypothesis, there are some questions that remain.

First, it is not clear if Peter represents a teacher with a special connection to this community of readers or if he was just one of the authoritative apostles, or more generally, one of many pastors concerned for the flock. Soards does not prove that the name Peter had special significance for this school or community. David Henry Schmidt did not find this to be the case in his 1972 doctoral dissertation on the Petrine writings (specifically 1 and 2 Peter, the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Gospel of Peter). In his opinion the evidence did not support this, noting among other things that (a) although they all draw from sources they do not appear to have made use of the same ones;[56] (b) each writing addresses a particular concern, but these problems and their way of dealing with them are varied;[57] and (c) the choice of the name 'Peter' does not seem to have been made for any reason that would link these texts. Thus 'there is no evidence of any common overriding factor which caused the Peter writings to be written under Peter's name. Instead we must find individual reasons behind each writer's attraction to identify with Peter.'[58]

Second, Jude and perhaps also 1 Peter were direct influences on 2 Peter, and if this is taken into account, the cumulative effect of similarities between these texts is not remarkable. And third, it may be that the idea of a school is inappropriate altogether at a more fundamental level with respect to the Petrine writings. Bauckham points out that those who postulate schools are attempting to explain theological and literary similarities between texts that are not believed to come from the same author. In the case of 1 and 2 Peter, 'there are no such similarities to be explained.'[59]

Another form of group theory is found in J. Ramsey Michael's thesis.

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55 M. L. Soards, '1 Peter, 2 Peter and Jude as Evidence for a Petrine School', *ANRW* 2.25.5, 1988, 3828-44. Cf. his summary statement (3828). He also points to P72 as 'a kind of physical evidence that this interpretation is not merely a cleverly devised myth' (3840). This papyrus codex from the third century includes only 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude from the NT as well as two Psalms and six noncanonical documents. 'Thus, one sees concrete proof that the three letters which are viewed together in this study were held together, apart from other NT writings, by some early Christian(s)' (3840).

56 Matthew, he notes, appears to have been reflected in each of these texts, 'but the popularity of this gospel limits the significance that this usage might have' (D. H. Schmidt, *The Peter Writings: Their Redactors and Their Relationships* [Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1972], 199; cf. further 187-89).

57 *Ibid.*, 199; cf., 190.

58 *Ibid.*, 200-01.

59 *Jude, 2 Peter*, 146.

Noticing a 'double time perspective' in 2 Peter, by which is meant the contrast between the lifetime of Peter ('as long as I am in this body,' 1:13) and future provision ('after my departure,' 'at any time,' 1:15), he proposes that a follower of the apostle composed this document.

> This seeming paradox could be explained if Second Peter were regarded as a compendium or anthology of genuine Petrine material put together in testamentary form by one or more of the apostle's followers after his death. The relation of Second Peter to the historical Peter would then be somewhat analogous to the relation between the Gospel writers and Jesus, who promised that after his death the Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance the things he had taught them (John 14:26 [cf. 2 Pet. 1:15]). Such an approach would recognize some truth in the critical assertion that Second Peter brings the apostle's authority to bear upon certain problems that became more acute after his death.[60]

In making this proposal, Michaels is careful to remove any guilt from the later author arguing that there was no intent to deceive. On the contrary, by placing Peter's name to what was in fact Petrine material, this writer showed integrity by giving proper credit to the apostle. It remains beyond proof or disproof however, and again, consensus will not be reached.

IV. Some conclusions

Did Peter write 2 Peter? In the end it must be admitted that, on *purely* historical grounds, we don't know – not that he couldn't have, not that he must have. The arguments for and against have been repeated time and again but the fact remains that there is simply not enough evidence to achieve a consensus. For many (most?) evangelical scholars, theological presuppositions are an important consideration.[61] This is appropriate as long as these are clearly stated. I find in

60 G. W. Barker, W. L. Lane, and J. R. Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (New York, 1969), 352.

61 As an example of faith presuppositions touching on historical critical matters, consider the following evaluation of pseudepigraphy as it relates to inspiration and canon: 'if the Pastorals are Scripture, their claim to authorship, like all other assertions, should be received as truth from God; and one who rejects this claim ought also to deny that they are Scripture, for what he is saying is that they have not the nature of Scripture, since they make false statements. . . . [and] if we are to regard 2 Peter as canonical we must regard it as apostolic also' (J. I. Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* [London, 1958], 184-85; full discussion 182-86). Here there is no attempt to prove the point on historical grounds. This is both a theological statement and faith statement. Worth attention is S. E. Porter's interesting examination of NT pseudepigraphy in relation to the canonization process ('Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: Implications for Canon', *BBR* 5 [1995], 105-23; cf. R. W. Wall, 'Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: A Response to S. E. Porter', *BBR* 5 [1995], 125-28).

Michell's conclusion regarding the Shakespeare question a helpful summary of the situation NT scholars find themselves in.

> There are [many theories about authorship] . . . and there is nothing to prove that any one of them is entirely wrong, or absolutely right. The only honest answer that can be given to someone who wants to know who wrote Shakespeare is that it is a perfect mystery, dangerously addictive, but very worthwhile looking into.[62]

The 2 Peter authorship question remains a mystery as well and one quite worthy of our continued attention. In our zeal to answer it, however, we need to be careful not to create evidence along the way that is simply not there.

Abstract

Authorship debates commence when the named author of a writing is thought to be incapable of producing that document. This assumes that enough is known about the author in question to make such a judgment. This paper is a plea for caution. It argues that there are often too many variables involved in such historical questions – especially with respect to earliest Christianity – to make dogmatic assertions. A better way is to admit openly our limitations. Five specific examples of potential ambiguity in authorship debates are discussed.

62 Michell, 261. Cf. M. J. Gilmour, 'How to Approach a Strange Manuscript: A Novel(ist's) Look at the Historical Task', *ARC* 27 [1999], 104-05.