

# THE AUTHORSHIP OF 2 PETER AND THE QUESTION OF HONESTY

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## INTRODUCTION

At least from the time of Athanasius' Festal Letter, written in A.D. 367, 2 Peter has had a firm place in the New Testament canon. However, when we compare it with other canonical books, we have to recognize that the epistle "has had a very rough passage down the centuries."<sup>1</sup> Adolf Schlatter defended the authenticity of every letter in the New Testament, except for 2 Peter.<sup>2</sup> Michael Green points out that even the sixteenth-century Reformers had some reservations about 2 Peter. "At the Reformation it was deemed second-class Scripture by Luther, rejected by Erasmus, and regarded with hesitancy by Calvin."<sup>3</sup> Some of the problems with the authorship of the letter have been especially highlighted during the post-Enlightenment era.<sup>4</sup> 2 Peter proved to be one of the easiest targets for the revisionist agenda of historical-critical scholarship, and consequently the Petrine authorship of the letter has been generally rejected. As W. G. Kümmel put it, "The Epistle clearly raises the claim to be written by the apostle Peter... But Peter cannot have written this Epistle."<sup>5</sup> Not everyone, however, conceded to this conclusion. As J. N. D. Kelly (somewhat patronizingly) remarked in 1969, "Scarcely anyone nowadays doubts that 2 Peter is pseudonymous, although it must be admitted of a few who do that they defend their case with an impressive combination of learning and ingenuity."<sup>6</sup> Without mentioning names, Kelly could think of the 1961 edition of Donald Guthrie's *New Testament Introduction*<sup>7</sup> and Michael Green's *2 Peter Reconsidered*,<sup>8</sup> which was published in the same year, as examples of such "impressive combination of learning and ingenuity." In the last few decades the voice of this small conservative camp got stronger in New Testament scholarship. Not a few recent scholarly works have defended the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: IVP, 1987), 13.

<sup>2</sup> A. Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles: The Development of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1999), 356. Reference given in Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 259-260.

<sup>3</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> "Modern critical doubts can be traced back to Grotius who dated the epistle in Trajan's time, but it was not until J. S. Semler's' ...time that the epistle was characterized as a forgery." Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> P. Feine, J. Behm, W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. Howard Clark Kee (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966), 302.

<sup>6</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1969), 235.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 1st ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Green, *2 Peter Reconsidered* (London: Tyndale Press, 1961).

Petrine authorship of 2 Peter, including the commentaries of Michael Green,<sup>9</sup> Douglass Moo,<sup>10</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner,<sup>11</sup> Gene L. Green,<sup>12</sup> and the more cautious but still open Peter H. Davids.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the reaffirmation of a certain form of pseudonymity in the definitive commentary of Richard Bauckham<sup>14</sup> somewhat disappointed those conservative scholars who hoped to have him on their side. Most of the above works, plus Carson and Moo's *An Introduction to the New Testament*,<sup>15</sup> and the fourth edition of Guthrie's *New Testament Introduction*, already respond to Bauckham's thesis, too.

In this paper I will first summarize the arguments put forward *against* and *for* Petrine authorship, and then discuss whether pseudonymity is allowed if honesty is a Christian virtue. In my presentation of the arguments, I want to demonstrate that there is more warrant for accepting Simon Peter as the author of the epistle than it is generally admitted. I will also argue that pseudonymity should be a real problem for Christians who read 2 Peter as part of their Scripture, because the question of transparent honesty is absolutely integral to the canonical status of any New Testament book.

## I. THE AUTHORSHIP OF 2 PETER

### *a. Arguments against Petrine Authorship*

Though the author of the epistle identifies himself as "Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ," and supports his claim with personal reminiscences (1:13-14 and 1:15-16), most modern scholars refuse to take this claim at face value. The main objections to Petrine authorship can be summarized in the following points.

1. The central section of the epistle is clearly a recasting of Jude, but the earliest possible date for Jude (it is presumed) is the early seventies of the first century. Since, in Kümmel's opinion, Jude belongs to the postapostolic period, "Peter cannot have written II Peter."<sup>16</sup> "Petrine authorship is forbidden by the literary relation to Jude."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*.

<sup>10</sup> Douglass Moo, *2 Peter and Jude*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*.

<sup>12</sup> Gene L. Green, *Jude & 2 Peter*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson and D. J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Kümmel, 302.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

2. The author's familiarity with Hellenistic religious and philosophical culture makes it unlikely that a Galilean fisherman could write the epistle. "The conceptual world and rhetorical language of II Peter are too strongly influenced by Hellenism to be attributed to Peter, or to a helper or pupil who wrote the Epistle under his command, even some time after the apostle's death."<sup>18</sup>

3. The reference to "our fathers" in 3:4 appears to indicate that the author lived at a time when the first generation of Christians had passed away. This is coupled with the delay of Christ's return, which delay is long enough to warrant an explanation. We know that the second-century Gnostics opposed the doctrine of Christ's return, and gave it a new meaning by spiritualizing it. According to Kümmel, the emphasis of 2 Peter on the parousia "presents a front against a movement which bears the essential characteristics of second-century Gnosticism."<sup>19</sup>

4. In the opinion of the majority of modern scholars, the appeal to a collection (as it is assumed) of Pauline epistles in 3:15-16, which epistles are then put in the same category as "the Scriptures," goes "far beyond the time of Peter"<sup>20</sup> and reflects "primitive Catholicism." The real Simon Peter could not have referred to a Pauline corpus, even less so in a canonical sense.

5. The next argument, listed by Kümmel, already assumes that 2 Peter is pseudonymous, and finds confirmation for the assumption in the way the author maintains his incognito. "Pseudonymity in 2 Peter is consistently carried out by means of strong emphasis upon Petrine composition."<sup>21</sup> According to Kümmel, the consistent character of pseudonymity betrays the late origin of 2 Peter.<sup>22</sup>

6. The above difficulties "are enormously enhanced if 1 Peter is accepted as authentic. The two letters have different styles," says Kelly.<sup>23</sup> Even if we accept that 1 Peter was written through an amanuensis, the Greek and the theology of 2 Peter are so distinct that it could not come from the same author as 1 Peter. "These facts were noted long ago by Jerome, who remarks... that they 'are divergent in style, character, and structure of words'."<sup>24</sup>

7. The most serious objection to Petrine authorship, however, is the relatively late acceptance of 2 Peter into the canon. Kümmel posits that "The epistle is nowhere mentioned in the second century."<sup>25</sup> The slowness and reluctance of the Church, especially at Rome, to accord it recognition present a serious problem for those who think Simon Peter wrote the epistle. 2 Peter is

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Interestingly, Bauckham, who advocates a certain form of pseudonymity, speaks of the author's deliberate breeches of the fiction as a proof for the transparency of his pseudepigraph genre. Bauckham, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Kümmel., 304-305.

<sup>23</sup> Kelly, 236.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Kümmel, 305.

missing from the Muratorian Canon, no church father before Origen quotes it, and even Eusebius has doubts about its authenticity.

Based on these arguments, Kelly confidently says: "We must therefore conclude that 2 Peter belongs to the luxuriant crop of pseudo-Petrine literature which sprang up around the memory of the Prince of the apostles."<sup>26</sup>

#### *b. Arguments for Petrine Authorship*

The above mentioned conservative scholars, who are "decidedly in the minority,"<sup>27</sup> remained nevertheless unconvinced by the objections to Petrine authorship. They argue that the case for pseudonymity is not conclusive at all; the historical evidence can just as well point in the other direction. They respond to the seven objections above as follows.

1. That there is a literary connection between 2 Peter and Jude is difficult to deny. "For of the twenty-five verses in Jude no less than fifteen appear, in whole or in part, in 2 Peter. Furthermore, many of the identical ideas, words and phrases occur in parallel in the two writings, and leave us in no doubt that there is some sort of literary relationship between them."<sup>28</sup> It is less certain, however, what kind of relationship there is between the two epistles. According to Bauckham, four explanations have been offered, and these are logically almost the only four possible: 1) Jude is dependent on 2 Peter; 2) 2 Peter is dependent on Jude; 3) both are dependent on a common source; 4) there is a common authorship. Only if option 2) is proved does the objection to Petrine authorship have some plausibility. But even then there are two underlying assumptions behind the objection, alternately used, which need further proof. The first one is that Jude was written much after the death of Simon Peter. The second is that the apostle, specially chosen by Christ, could not possibly use the material of a non-apostle. Neither of the assumptions can claim for universal assent. The late dating of the New Testament books has been challenged from an unlikely source when J. A. T. Robinson published his landmark *Redating the New Testament*.<sup>29</sup> He argues that if Silvanus was Peter's amanuensis for 1 Peter, Jude penned 2 Peter for him. Green notes, that "Robinson's view has not won adherents, but it does at least show that the literary relation between 2 Peter and Jude need not affect authenticity either way."<sup>30</sup> The claim that Peter could not possibly use the work of a non-apostle can be questioned, too, in light of the fact that "baptismal catechesis, even perhaps a baptismal homily, underlies a good deal of 1 Peter."<sup>31</sup> "It is equally plain that some primitive Christian household rules are

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<sup>26</sup> Kelly, 236.

<sup>27</sup> Carson and Moo, 661.

<sup>28</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 23-24.

<sup>29</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

<sup>30</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

incorporated in that letter... If Peter thus took over and used in his First Epistle a good deal of material composed by others, why should he not have done so in his Second?"<sup>32</sup>

2. Could a Galilean fisherman write a document that is influenced by Hellenistic thought? Kümmel lists several examples for the supposed Hellenistic cast of 2 Peter, including his reference to "goodness" and "glory," his emphasis on knowledge, the presence of the concept of virtue, and the phrase "that you may participate in the divine nature" (1:4). Guthrie questions the weight of this argument. "None of the terms is of a type which could not have formed part of the vocabulary of a bilingual Galilean."<sup>33</sup> If, however, these are developed philosophical concepts, says Guthrie, a fisherman would have to be ruled out indeed as the author.<sup>34</sup> But, according to Guthrie, "the bandying about of some such terms as 'knowledge' (γνώσις) or 'virtue' (ἀρετή) need not suppose acquaintance with current philosophical discussions, any more than it does today."<sup>35</sup> And he adds, "This is the kind of evidence which is most convincing to those who have already concluded on other grounds that 2 Peter cannot have been produced in the first century AD."<sup>36</sup> Green argues that such concepts as divine nature, knowledge, goodness, and glory are biblical, and even if they sound Greek, the writer is only "putting his Christian doctrine into Greek dress for the purposes of communication, without in the least committing himself to the pagan associations of the terms."<sup>37</sup> Carson and Moo remarks, that, according to several scholars, "the author may be consciously imitating the so-called 'Asiatic' style, a form of rhetorical speech that was becoming popular at the time."<sup>38</sup>

3. Are the arguments for a late date based on the parousia-teaching compelling? First, does the reference to "our fathers" in 3:4 indicate a late date? It is certainly possible that the phrase refers to the first Christian generation, but Carson and Moo point out that it is equally possible that it refers to the patriarchs of the Jewish nation. "For, as vv. 5-7 make clear, the 'scoffers' were apparently citing the unchangeableness of the world since creation as evidence for their

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Guthrie, 837.

<sup>34</sup> I do not think even this is a necessary conclusion. If Simon Peter wrote the epistle, probably decades after leaving his profession as a fisherman, he could go through an intellectual development that included learning of concepts in the Hellenistic world in which he preached the gospel. His world was broadened as he left Galilee, why could not his understanding of his contemporaries also be broadened, especially if he had a few decades for learning, coupled with a strong evangelistic passion? I have seen peasant preachers in my country (Hungary) who were confined to their countryside environment and yet, through much reading and listening, acquired more than just a basic knowledge of the philosophical trends and major concepts of their times.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Carson and Moo, 661.

skepticism about the parousia."<sup>39</sup> Green emphasizes the same point, and adds, "If they were saying merely that nothing had happened since the foundation of the church, Peter's reply, namely that there was once an interruption (the flood), would have been irrelevant."<sup>40</sup> Second, is Kümmel right that the emphasis of 2 Peter on the parousia "presents a front against a movement which bears the essential characteristics of second-century Gnosticism"? Green turns the argument upside down. When was the hope of the parousia most prominent in the church? - he asks. Scholars generally agree that while mid-first-century Christians experienced the shock of the delay of Christ's second coming, we see the decay in the hope of a personal return of Christ in the writings of the Apologists and second-century Fathers. It is much more plausible, therefore, to find the scoffers in the middle of the first century, when the disappointment (if there ever was such disappointment) could be felt (and mocked), than in the second century, when Christians spoke less of the parousia.<sup>41</sup>

4. What about the appeal to a collection of Paul's epistles in 3:15-16? Does that tip the scales against Petrine authorship? Most conservative scholars do not think so, and for understandable reasons. According to Guthrie, here again caution is needed. "It must at once be noted that Peter's words need not imply the existence of an authorized corpus of Paul's letters. The 'all' in 3:16 need mean no more than all those known to Peter at the time of writing."<sup>42</sup> We do not even have to assume that the letters were all known to the readers, since Peter is informing them of the difficulties in understanding some of Paul's thoughts in them.

But is it likely that already in the middle of the first century Paul's letters would receive such veneration as the status of "scripture" with other γραφαί? The text, no doubt, puts Paul's writings alongside the Hebrew Bible. Again, most conservative scholars do not see a problem in attributing such a claim to Peter. "The apostles were in no doubt that their written words were as authoritative as their spoken utterances. And they were no less clear that the Holy Spirit of God who had inspired the prophets was at work through them."<sup>43</sup> Green argues that this is precisely the point of 1 Peter 1:11-12, as it is of 2 Peter 1:18-21.<sup>44</sup> The apostles expected that their letters would be read in the churches, alongside the Old Testament (cf. Col 4:16), exactly because they "considered their own words to carry an authority tantamount to Scripture (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:3; 2 Cor. 10:11; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:14)."<sup>45</sup> This authority-claim was characteristic of Paul, and it should not be surprising if another apostle (Peter) acknowledged that authority. Guthrie even notes, that the way the author speaks about Paul ("our beloved brother") is

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 662.

<sup>40</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>42</sup> Guthrie, 824.

<sup>43</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 31.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Carson and Moo, 661.

in contrast with the more exalted ways of the sub-apostolic Fathers (Polycarp: “the blessed and glorious Paul”; Clement: “the blessed Paul”; Ignatius: “the sanctified Paul... right blessed”). “The description in 2 Peter would be almost over-familiar for a pseudepigraphist, although it would be wholly in character with what we should expect of the warm-hearted apostle portrayed in the synoptic gospels.”<sup>46</sup> It can still be the work of a skillful imitator, but for Guthrie this alternative is less easier to conceive than that it was penned by Simon Peter. The arguments for an early dating thus presents a reasonable alternative for the view that 2 Peter reflects “primitive Catholicism.”

5. The fifth objection to Petrine authorship, the consistent character of pseudonymity, is an odd argument for pseudonymity. For those who assume the pseudonymous nature of the epistle, the argument can have some weight, but it cannot stand by itself. The fact that the authorship of Simon Peter is consistently maintained throughout the work can have another, not less rational, explanation: Simon Peter wrote the letter! If the author is Peter, would he have been less consistent in maintaining his identity as the author? To say the least, this point does not decide anything. The real weight of the argument against Petrine authorship appears to lie on the next two objections.

6. Since most conservative scholars accept the Petrine authorship of 1 Peter, they have to deal with the argument that there is an obvious contrast between the language and the theology of 1 Peter and 2 Peter. Though they generally admit the differences, conservative theologians do not believe that the contrast should cause an insurmountable problem for accepting the Petrine authorship of both. Green examines both the supposed stylistic differences and the differences of thought between the two letters, and concludes that there are rational explanations for these differences. Part of the stylistic differences can be explained by the fact that Peter used Silvanus as an amanuensis for 1 Peter, and since we are specifically told that Peter had other secretarial assistants, “there is nothing improper in arguing that much of the stylistic differences may well be due to a change in scribe.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, there are striking similarities, too, between the two letters. Green lists several studies that demonstrate the close lexical connections between 1 Peter and 2 Peter, which stand as close linguistically as 1 and 2 Corinthians or 1 Timothy and Titus.<sup>48</sup> “When in addition to all this, it is remembered that part of the difficulties in the diction of this Epistle arise from the Aramaic thoughts which lies behind it,” and here Green refers to studies that demonstrate Semitisms in the letter, “and the possibility that it may be dependent upon traditional oral or written material for use against heretics, ...the language of 2 Peter need no longer be a serious stumbling block to

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<sup>46</sup> Guthrie, 826.

<sup>47</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 17-18.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

accepting the authenticity of the letter if it should commend itself on other grounds.”<sup>49</sup>

There are, however, many supposed differences in the theologies and thoughts of the two epistles. Green deals with this objection, too. He emphasizes that the two epistles were written to two entirely different situations, and therefore it is natural that their subject-matters are also different. Early Christian letters were written to meet very urgent needs, they were not “theological treatises penned with meticulous care in the quiet of the study.”<sup>50</sup> “1 Peter envisages Christians facing persecution, 2 Peter Christians facing false teaching of a Gnostic flavor. The key note of 1 Peter, is, accordingly, hope; of 2 Peter, true knowledge.”<sup>51</sup> Green goes on and demonstrates of other supposed dissimilarities that all can easily be explained without having to conclude that the two letters came from different authors.

7. If so, and if all other objections can also be given plausible answers that allow Petrine authorship, why is it then that 2 Peter is so poorly attested in the early church? Why the hesitation that surrounds its canonical status in the first three centuries?<sup>52</sup> We can also ask, however, if modern scholars are in a better touch with the opinion of the early church than those who uncritically accept Petrine authorship. Conservative critics of the modern position argue, in harmony with the *final* verdict of the early church and the overwhelming majority of pre-Enlightenment Christianity, that 2 Peter was rightly admitted into the canon. They insist that its apostolic origin is just as plausible now as it was for the majority of the church fathers at least as early as the third century. Why?

Guthrie admits that the external evidence is not strongly favorable in the case of this epistle, and before Origen’s time the evidence for 2 Peter is at best inconclusive. Nevertheless he points out that it is misleading to “take the earliest known quotation from a book and conclude that the book was not canonical until a period just prior to the date of citation.”<sup>53</sup> Guthrie argues that there might actually be allusions to 2 Peter before the time of Origen, in the writings of Irenaeus, Ignatius, Hermas and Clement of Rome.<sup>54</sup> Green goes even further, and emphasizes that 2 Peter was not only “contained in the Sahidic and Bohairic versions of the New Testament, dating from (?) the late second and fourth centuries respectively, but we are told that Clement of Alexandria had it in his Bible and wrote a commentary on it. This takes us back at least to the middle of

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> This fact made even some of the Reformers uncertain about whether Simon Peter could have written the epistle. We have to note, however, that Calvin still upheld Petrine authorship, though he thought it was mediated through one of his disciples; and that Luther’s view of the canon allowed levels of significance for canonical books.

<sup>53</sup> Guthrie, 805.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. See also Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 15n1.



the second century.”<sup>55</sup> But this is not all. “The *Apocalypse of Peter*, written somewhere between AD 110-140, makes much of 2 Peter, which throws the date of our Epistle back further still.”<sup>56</sup>

Guthrie points out that 2 Peter has never been classified as a spurious writing, and even Eusebius, who had doubts about the book, makes it clear that the majority accepted it as authentic. True, 2 Peter was surrounded by more doubts than any other books of the New Testament, but at the end it went through the strictest filters of the early church, and was decidedly viewed as an authentic apostolic epistle. It is nevertheless justified to ask the question: why did 2 Peter have such a rough passage in the first centuries? Guthrie has an interesting reminder which might point toward an explanation. “A mitigating factor, which has all too often been overlooked, is the influence of the pseudo-Petrine literature upon church opinion. If Gnostic groups had used Peter’s name to drive home their own particular tenets, this fact would cause the orthodox church to take particular care not to use any spurious Petrine epistles.”<sup>57</sup> Since the church knew at least the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Gospel of Peter*, there was good warrant to be cautious when another document claimed Petrine authorship. “Some of the more nervous probably regarded 2 Peter suspiciously for this reason, but the fact that it ultimately gained acceptance in spite of the pseudo-Petrine literature is an evidence more favourable to its authenticity than against it, unless”<sup>58</sup> adds Guthrie, “the orthodox Church Fathers had by this time become wholly undiscerning, which is not, however, borne out by the firm rejection of other works attributed to Peter.”<sup>59</sup>

The poor attestation of 2 Peter can be explained on another ground, too. It is clear that not all apostolic documents had equal circulation in the early church. As Timothy Paul Jones graphically describes in his popular book *Misquoting Truth*, churches in the mid-second century had their own “book-chests” with their own collections of books. These collections most likely included the Four Gospels and the thirteen letters of Paul, but not all so-called Catholic Epistles.<sup>60</sup> Each church had a slightly different collection, and these collections only slowly expanded to include all twenty seven books. This is confirmed, for example, by the fact that the Syrian Peshitta (AD 411) still contained only 1 Peter, James, and 1 John of the Catholic Epistles. Seeing the bad state of the text of 2 Peter and its restricted attestation, Vansittart assumes that for a time 2 Peter existed in a single copy only, and thus few churches had access to it.<sup>61</sup> If this is true, it can explain not only why 2 Peter was so poorly attested in the first centuries, but also why it

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<sup>55</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Guthrie, 809.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2007), 34-38.

<sup>61</sup> Green refers to Vansittart’s study (*Journal of Philology*, III, pp. 357ff.) in *2 Peter and Jude*, 15n1.

was received with some suspicion once it became more well-known among Christians.

### *b. Conclusion*

In light of the above arguments and counter-arguments, it is safe to conclude that the case of conservative scholars is at least plausible. Green mentions F. J. A. Hort, who “when once asked what his view of 2 Peter was, replied that if he were asked he would say that the balance of argument was against the Epistle – and the moment he had done so he would begin to think that he might be wrong!”<sup>62</sup> Green of course goes further than that. “The solid worth of 2 Peter, so manifestly superior to anything the second century had to offer, the striking contrast it affords to the undoubted Petrine pseudepigraphs, the absence of any credible motive of its origin as a pseudepigraph, all make one pause.”<sup>63</sup> It is certainly justified to be cautious about the authorship of 2 Peter, since the early church was apparently very cautious, too. But the real question we need to answer in light of the alternative explanations is this: are we, in the twenty-first century, in a better position to discern the authenticity of 2 Peter than the early Christians were? Do we have more information or a better perspective that helps us come to a superior conclusion than that of the majority of the Church Fathers? I do not think so, and therefore am more in favor of the conservative position.

## II. THE QUESTION OF HONESTY

What is at stake in the debate over the authorship of 2 Peter? Does it make a difference whether the epistle was written by Simon Peter, as it claims, or someone else under his name? Is pseudonymity mainly an academic question? In the following pages I want to argue that what we decide on the authorship of 2 Peter has serious consequences for the use of the book in the life of the church. The cautious procedure of the early church proves that for them it did matter if 2 Peter was a trustworthy document or a forgery. Their final conclusion was in favor of 2 Peter, and this is the only reason the letter acquired the veneration it has had throughout the last two millennia.

### *a. Pseudonymity and the Early Church*

The second edition of Carson and Moo’s *An Introduction to the New Testament* has a very useful essay on pseudonymity and pseudepigraphy. The authors demonstrate that “the motives of pseudepigraphers, ancient and modern, have

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

been highly divers.”<sup>64</sup> These motives could be pure malice, promise of financial payment, gaining credence, false humility, a desire to get published, and so on. We have many Jewish (e.g., *1 Enoch*, *4 Ezra*, *Apocalypse of Adam*, *Testament of Moses*) and extrabiblical Christian (e.g., *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Gospel of Thomas*, *3 Corinthians*) examples for pseudepigraphical literature. “All sides agree that pseudepigraphy was common in the ancient world.”<sup>65</sup> But Carson and Moo emphasize two facts regarding the data. First, we have hardly any evidence for pseudepigraphical letters, but “it is in the epistolary genre that the subject impinges on the New Testament documents.”<sup>66</sup> Second, both Greeks and Romans showed great concern to maintain the authenticity of their collections of writings from the past. Carson and Moo approvingly quote L. R. Donaldson’s work on pseudepigraphy, in which he concludes, “No one ever seems to have accepted a document as religiously and philosophically prescriptive which was known to be forged. I do not know a single example.”<sup>67</sup>

But what was the stance of the Church Fathers? The unanimous evidence shows that they rejected pseudepigrapha. Using the authority of an apostle for a letter that he did not write was seen as simply dishonest. No good motive was accepted for such practice. When the Asian elders found out that *Acts of Paul* was pseudonymous, they condemned the author. When in about A.D. 200 Sarapion first read the *Gospel of Peter*, he thought that it was genuine. When, however, he, after some investigation, concluded that it was not genuine, he rejected it and wrote an explanation for the church of Rhossus: “For we, brothers, receive both Peter and the other apostles of Christ. But pseudepigrapha in their name we reject, as men of experience, knowing that we did not receive such [from the tradition].”<sup>68</sup> Tertullian condemned the elder who wrote the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, despite the elder’s protestation that he had done so out of love for Paul.<sup>69</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem excluded all other gospels beside the four canonical ones, because they were pseudepigrapha.<sup>70</sup> Carson and Moo add, “We know of no exception to the evidence, which is far more extensive than this brief summary suggests.”<sup>71</sup>

This conclusion should not be confused with the assumption that there were no pseudepigrapha in the early church. There obviously were, and scholars have the right to examine whether any of the canonical writings fall into that category. The above conclusion is about the claim that the writing of pseudonymous letters was an *accepted* practice among the early Christians. In

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<sup>64</sup> Carson and Moo, 338.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Lewis R. Donaldson, *Pseudepigraphy and Ethical Argument in the Pastoral Epistles*, HUT 22 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1986), 11. Quoted in Carson and Moo, 342.

<sup>68</sup> Eusebius, *H. E.* 6.12.3; cf. 2.25.4-7. Quoted in Carson and Moo, 342.

<sup>69</sup> Tertullian, *De baptismo* 17.

<sup>70</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech.* 4.36.

<sup>71</sup> Carson and Moo, 343.

light of the evidence, we have to reject the claim. As Carson and Moo assess the data, “every time such a writing could be identified with any certainty, it was rejected.”<sup>72</sup> Guthrie comes to the same conclusion: “There is no evidence in Christian literature for the idea of a conventional literary device, by which an author as a matter of literary custom, and with the full approbation of his circle of readers, publishes his own productions in another’s name. There was always an ulterior motive.”<sup>73</sup> Such forgery was generally seen as dishonest and clearly unworthy for the canonical status.

We can see the same attitude to forgery in the canonical epistles, as well. The author of 2 Thessalonians is aware that some people might write letters in his name (2 Thess. 2:1-2). In 3:17 therefore he gives them a sign that enables them to distinguish between forgeries and genuine apostolic letters: “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.” (ESV) Carson and Moo comment, “If the author was not Paul (as many scholars think), then our pseudonymous author is in the odd position of condemning pseudonymous authors – a literary forgery that damns literary forgeries. If, on the other hand, the author was Paul, then the apostle himself makes it clear that he is aware of pseudonymity and condemns the practice.”<sup>74</sup>

Moo, in his commentary, argues, that “the very fact that 2 Peter was accepted as a canonical book, then, presumes that the early Christians who made this decision were positive that Peter wrote it. Those who did not think that Peter wrote it barred it from the canon for this reason.”<sup>75</sup> We have to choose: either we regard the letter as a forgery (“intended perhaps to claim an authority that the author did not really have”),<sup>76</sup> and then omit it from the canon, or accept Petrine authorship. From the beginning the canonical status of 2 Peter has depended on the verdict about Petrine authorship. Either canonical status or pseudepigraphy. *Tertium non datur.*

#### *b. 2 Peter as Testament?*

Unconvinced by the arguments for the Petrine authorship of 2 Peter, but rejecting the charge of dishonesty in the motive of its pseudonymous author, Bauckham proposes a third option. In his opinion, “Second Peter belongs to two literary genres, the letter and the testament.”<sup>77</sup> It is a genuine letter, written and sent to a specific addressee, probably the same group of churches that had received 1 Peter. “However, it is equally clear that 2 Peter belongs to the genre of ancient

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Green, 2 Peter and Jude, 34. See Bauckham’s alternative proposal about testaments below.

<sup>74</sup> Carson and Moo, 345-346.

<sup>75</sup> Moo, 2 Peter and Jude, 23-24.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>77</sup> Bauckham, 131.

Jewish literature known to modern scholars as the 'farewell speech' or 'testament'.<sup>78</sup> In Jewish usage the testament was a fictional genre, says Bauckham, the pseudonymous authors invented their materials, and "they were normally expected as such."<sup>79</sup> People *knew* that despite the (expected) verisimilitude, the author largely used his own imagination. "Second Peter bears so many marks of the testament genre (especially the conventional testamentary language in 1:12-15) that readers familiar with the genre must have expected it to be fictional, like other examples they knew."<sup>80</sup> The presumption would be that the author gave a good report of Peter's teaching, but they would not presume that Peter himself wrote it. On the contrary, recognizing the genre they would know that it was pseudonymous. Bauckham claims that the fiction of Petrine authorship was therefore a "transparent one."<sup>81</sup> Tertium datur: 2 Peter is an honest, transparent pseudepigraphy!

Bauckham's proposal received a listening ear at many conservative scholars. Green, for example, expresses his openness: "If, however, it could be conclusively proved that 2 Peter is that otherwise unexampled thing, a perfectly orthodox epistolary pseudepigraph, I, for one, believe that we should accept the fact that God did employ the literary genre of pseudepigraphy for the communicating of his revelation."<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Schreiner admits that Bauckham's view is possible and is more acceptable for evangelicals than other views of pseudepigraphy. "If we could establish that testaments were written in the name of another (pseudepigraphy), that the convention was recognized by all, and that such documents could still be confirmed as canonical, then there would be no objection. We would simply recognize a cultural practice that seems foreign to us today."<sup>83</sup> But both Green and Schreiner reject Bauckham's theory, on various grounds. Schreiner emphasizes that though Bauckham's theory fails, it does not fail because it would contradict the inspiration of Scripture, "for there could have been a convention in which testaments were accepted as transparent fictions."<sup>84</sup> "Rather, it fails because hard evidence to support the theory is lacking."<sup>85</sup>

Green summarizes his objections to Bauckham's "able and well-argued hypothesis"<sup>86</sup> in four points. First, if the testament genre was a transparent fiction, evident to all readers, why is it that this has not been apparent to Christians throughout the ages until Bauckham came up with this proposal? Secondly, if the combination of early date and orthodox content is enough ground for a book to be put into the canon, why were *Hermas*, *The Epistle to*

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 134-135.

<sup>82</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 38.

<sup>83</sup> Schreiner, 274.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 38.

*Diognetus*, *The Epistle of Barnabas* and the *First Epistle of Clement* excluded? (Hebrews is not a good analogy, since it is not a pseudonymous but an anonymous document.) Thirdly, it is far from clear that all writings in the testament genre must be fictional. There are testaments of David and Moses in the Old Testament, neither of which need to be fictional. Why could not Peter himself write a real testament of his own? And fourthly, Green asks whether Bauckham “has not greatly exaggerated the influence of the testamentary genre on the Epistle.”<sup>87</sup> What grounds are there for supposing that 2 Peter is a testament at all? “Whatever grounds there may be have certainly escaped the majority of commentators over the centuries,” concludes Green.

### III. CONCLUSION

My own conclusion can be summarized in three statements.

First, in light of the arguments against and for Petrine authorship, we can confidently say that it is a tenable and even plausible position that the apostle Peter wrote 2 Peter. Conservative scholars will not be able to convince all their colleagues, but they have sufficiently demonstrated in the last five decades that their position is just as defensible as the one for pseudepigraphy. I for one strongly incline to accept their case.

Secondly, the question of honesty is a fundamental question that needs to be addressed in connection with a book that is surrounded by suspicions of inauthenticity. Proponents of the pseudonymous authorship of 2 Peter (with the exception of Bauckham, on the one hand, and those for whom the canonical status of a book is nothing more than historical contingency, on the other hand) do not seem to fully realize the significance of their claim for the use of 2 Peter in the church. If the epistle’s own claim is that it was written by Simon Peter, and this claim is supported by personal reminiscences, the supposition of forgery completely undermines the trustworthiness of the author. Unless, of course, the forgery was a transparent and acceptable device, as Bauckham argues. We have seen that the early church was very sensitive to this problem, and condemned all known forgeries, preventing the intrusion of pseudepigraph writings into the canon. If 2 Peter was not written by Peter, as a minority in the early church supposed, it should not have a place in the canon. The early church believed that canon and honesty belonged together. Dishonest authorship (even if the motive was said to be love, as in the case of *Paul and Thecla*) should draw condemnation not veneration on a piece of literature.

And thirdly, Bauckham’s case, that 2 Peter was a testament, and thus a transparent and acceptable fiction, should be seen as a possible but unlikely proposal. If Bauckham is right, 2 Peter should not be accused of being a forgery,

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

but should be read as a piece of fiction. This fiction still has ethical and canonical authority. It does not have the apostolic authority of Peter, but it nevertheless has, together with other canonical books, the divine authority of the Holy Spirit. This is a possible solution that seeks to unite critical scholarship on the one hand, and evangelical commitment to the trustworthiness of Scripture on the other. The fact, however, that the early church, as well as later centuries, failed to understand this supposedly transparent device, weakens Bauckham's case to the point of almost entirely discrediting it.

On the whole, I think we do not have sufficient reasons to overturn the final verdict of the early church, that 2 Peter is an authentic letter coming from Simon Peter, the servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.

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