

General Epistles Overview

The seven New Testament letters of James; 1 & 2 Peter; 1,2, & 3 John, and Jude are known as the general (or catholic) epistles because they aren't addressed to a particular community or person. Rather they seem to be letters meant to be distributed widely among early Christian communities and they address issues of general (or universal) concern rather than specific issues.

Though attributed to important figures in the early church with close connections to Jesus (Peter and John were among the twelve disciples, of course, and James and Jude were younger brothers of Jesus), there is, like everything in the Bible, a lively debate about authorship. There is, however, a general consensus that all of these were written in the last half of the 1st century and represent the real concerns and guidance of the very early church.

We've covered James in a separate study, so this study will cover the other six.

General Epistles

1Peter – Introduction

1st Peter claims for itself to have been written by the disciple Peter. Many scholars believe that this is genuinely the work of Peter himself, written shortly before the first real persecution began in Rome in the early 60's that resulted in Peter's death as a martyr.

Other scholars believe that it was written sometime after the Jewish War in the 70's, but before widespread persecution began in the 90's by a group of believers who were acolytes of Peter himself who wanted to offer Peter's wisdom to the changing circumstances of the church.

The letter itself is directed a number of communities in Asia Minor (the same region that St Paul was most active in). These communities seem to have been made up mostly of Gentile converts, who were facing social and family resistance to their commitment to Jesus. They are referred to as "exiles of the Dispersion," which most likely is meant to reinforce the letter's predominant theme that the true home of Christians is with Christ and that we are only sojourners in this world.

Most believe that the letter was written from Rome, where Peter had become a leader of the Christians there. Throughout the letter, Rome is referred to as Babylon which was a common practice in Jewish and Christian writings of this era. This conflation of Rome with Babylon is meant to draw on the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures where Babylon is the destroyer of Israel.

By and large, 1Peter doesn't offer anything especially unique in its understanding of who Jesus is and what his purpose was. Much of what Peter says can be found elsewhere from earlier writers. One exception might be the passages in chapters 3 and 4 that refer to Jesus descending to Hell to save the dead. Mostly what Peter offers is the reassurance of one who has gone through his own trials of faith and emerged renewed and recommitted to the way of Jesus.

General Epistles

1Peter – Chapter 1

v1-2 The letter begins with a fairly standard greeting and is addressed to churches in Asia Minor (Pontus, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia are all Roman Provinces)



As mentioned above, the phrase “exiles in dispersion” is meant to connect these new Christians, of primarily Gentile origin, to the Biblical story of exile.

v3-12 Moving from the salutation, the letter offers what is actually an extended blessing on whomever would be hearing this read out. It is intended to flatter the hearers a little bit, but also to remind them of the gifts which their faith has afforded them.

- v3-5 These verses reiterate the core beliefs of Christians:
- Jesus is the son of God
 - Jesus has been resurrected from the dead and is alive now
 - Jesus’ death and resurrection have opened to us a new relationship with God
 - This new relationship is the pathway to an eternal life with God
 - This salvation begins at the end of this age

v6-7 Here Peter mentions the “trials” that some are experiencing. At this point in church history, these would primarily have been social ostracization and suspicion.

Ancient society, especially Roman society, was deeply superstitious and suspicious of religious systems (especially from the “exotic” east) that might threaten the precarious spiritual balance and result in real world troubles (disease, drought, crop failure, etc.). Peter also speaks of the future judgment when our faiths will be tested by Jesus when he returns.

v8-9 Here we see the early church’s turn from expectation of an imminent return to a perspective that Jesus’ return may be a ways off yet. Peter exhorts these followers of Jesus to remain committed even though they may not see him (i.e. his return) in their lifetimes. Yet even though they are living in a liminal age, their salvation remains assured through their faith.

v10-12 These verses rest on the idea that the ancient prophets, though they were speaking of events in their own time, were inspired by the spirit of Christ such that their words *also* foretold of Jesus’ advent and passion. Thus the prophets are understood to have been speaking to those who have been adopted into God’s people, not through birth, but through faith (and baptism, presumably).

v13-21 Peter now shifts from theological reflection and moves to ethical concerns; speaking to how our faith commitment should translate into our daily lives.

v13 This draws on the Jewish remembrance of the Exodus, when the people of Israel were called to gird their loins for God’s imminent call to move out of bondage.

v14-16 Again, Peter references the Gentile origins of these communities (their “former ignorance”) and urges his hearers to amend their *actions and behaviors* to Christ’s example.

v17 What does it mean to live in *reverent* fear? My favorite analogy is water; water is essential for life and most people enjoy being in it, whether for bathing or playing in hot weather. People seem *drawn* to water – beaches, lakes, rivers, etc. At the same time, water is fundamentally dangerous. It can drown us, it can wash away our homes, it can devastate our crops, it can come in huge hurricanes and simply annihilate us. We are wise to be *reverently* fearful of water; so too God.

v18-21 Peter gets into a little Atonement theory here; reflecting on the *how* of salvation, while also affirming that our freedom was always God’s intention for us. Atonement Theories;

- Ransom Theory - Christ paid to free us from evil’s grasp.

- Penal Substitution(a kind of sadistic form of ransom theory) – Christ is punished by God with the punishment reserved for us (death)
- Christus Victor – God trades Christ to Satan for humanity’s freedom, but Christ cannot be contained by death (i.e., Satan) and thus breaks free
- Moral Exemplar – In this one, Atonement is not a cosmological shift (and doesn’t even require the existence of Satan) but rather Jesus is a kind of guide to the freedom that God had always offered to us.

v22 Peter reiterates that true faith bears fruit – in this case genuine mutual love.

v23-24 These two verses again link the Christian story to the older story of Israel by linking the promise found in Isaiah (40:6-8) to the Christian gospel.

1Peter Chapter 2

In chapter 2, Peter continues his guidance on the motivations and outward affect of Christian life.

v1 Here, Peter gives examples of behavior to be avoided, all of which can be positively asserted as personal integrity

v2-3 These verses give a nod to psalm 34 and its call to rely wholly upon God
The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.
O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.
O fear the LORD, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want.
Psalm 34:7-9

They also seem to suggest that the motivations of some within the Christian community aren't purely spiritual or perhaps he is referring, in verse 3, to the catechumens who have not been wholly accepted into the community yet.

v4-10 Peter here draws upon the metaphor of Jesus as a cornerstone for the community of God's people; this metaphor is used by Jesus himself, of course, while his use draws on imagery found primarily in Isaiah.

This posits acceptance of the divinity of Jesus as *the* defining issue of the emergent church, suggesting that those who cannot, or will not, accept this proposition somehow are outside of salvation.

I think we should think carefully on this. Peter is in the midst of a significant conflict between those who hewed to traditional ideas about God and those who understood Jesus to be inviting them into a different kind of understanding and we must allow for the possibility of bias on Peter's part as he argues for acceptance of his understanding. Taking Peter at his word potentially leads us down the path of supersessionism and anti-Semitism.

Though I want to affirm my belief that Jesus is the truest image of God available to us and that the example of Jesus is the one best way to live our best lives; I also

understand that Jesus himself, when speaking of judgement referred only to actions and not to beliefs, so I think we should be careful to do the same.

v6 Isaiah 28:6

v7 Psalm 118:22

v8 Isaiah 8:14

v9 paraphrasing Exodus and Isaiah

v10 Hosea 1:9 and 2:3

v11-25 The remaining verses of this chapter (and continuing into chapter 3) continues with Peter's ethical teachings, but these are focused specifically on how Christians are meant to interact with those *outside* the Christian community. This should reinforce for us that Christian faith is not an invitation to withdraw into our own bubbles but that we are called to be witnesses to our faith through our everyday conduct and demeanor.

v11 "aliens and exiles" from their "true" heavenly home, but also an acknowledgment of the social ostracization of Christians at this point in the history of the church.

v12 Basically, live out the golden rule in order to counter the slanderous gossip which was directed at Christians and their misunderstood practices

v13-15 In other words, try to be good neighbors (and citizens) so that people will be convinced of the truth of Christianity by the way you act (i.e., Preach the gospel always, if necessary, use words). Or as the 2nd century author Tertullian wrote in reference to a later age of real oppression; "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Also note that the emperor and other authorities are not deserving of *special* honor.

v16-17 Christian freedom is about freedom *from* rather than freedom *to*. We are not free to do as we please; we are freed from fear (of death, of rejection, of loss, of the limits of the law, etc.) so that there should be no barriers to our responding to the world in love.

v18-22 These verses are quite difficult for modern hearers. The absolute rejection of slavery as being antithetical to Christian life is, of course, a fairly recent innovation

and evidence, I would suggest, that the Holy Spirit is still active in teaching us new things.

But let's look at Peter's world. Slavery was commonplace in the Roman empire in the first century (it actually became *more* prominent later). Estimates vary, but somewhere between 15%-30% of the population were slaves, most were owned by elite families (the top 1%) and unlike American slavery, more than half lived and worked in cities. Also, unlike American slavery, slaves were often given great responsibility as household managers and craftsmen.

That Christians considered slaves worthy enough to be addressed as Peter does here, and welcomed into Christian communities, actually represented one of the most radical differences between Christian communities and the rest of society.

Though the Hebrew Scriptures have laws about treatment of slaves, early Christians seemed to have realized that slavery wasn't in accord with Jesus' teaching, while also acknowledging both its ubiquity and their lack of real social power to address it. In the story of the slave Onesimus, from Paul's letter to Philemon we can see the early church straining to reconcile Christian fellowship with slavery. Historical tradition suggests that Onesimus, was released from bondage and eventually became bishop of Ephesus.

v23-25 Peter expands beyond just the slaves he was addressing to speak to all believers, reminding them that the opportunity for salvation and eternal life are neither earned nor deserved by those who receive it; it is the work of God, and God alone.

1 Peter Chapter 3

v1-7 Peter continues his teachings, turning now to wives (and husbands) In all of these – Christians who are ostracized, slave, and wives, Peter is talking about those who are powerless might overcome, with God’s help, those who hold power over them primarily by getting those with power to *submit* themselves to Christ (i.e., give away their power). Peter doesn’t want to justify the powerful or say that their power is the way it *should* be, but recognizing that it *is* that way Peter offers a path to undo it with patience and perseverance.

v1 Women generally, and wives particularly, held little status or independent agency in Roman culture. Actually this is almost universally true in most human societies across time, and that it should be so is truly curious to me (I digress).

v2-4 This contrast between inner and outer adornment was a common theme in Greco-Roman literature and drama. We see echoes of this still and some Christian traditions still hold this as an important practice. In some ways, it is parallel to the teachings about not pursuing wealth or other worldly goals that distract us from pursuing the life envisioned for us by God. On the other hand, like many good core ideas, it has been repeatedly misused by those who would twist it to subjugate and judge women who seek to express their own agency in the world.

v5-6 This is a unique use of Sarah as a model for female conduct (I guess they forgot about the time Sara scoffed at God’s promises about having a child).

v7 We may read this as a kind of throwaway admonition to husbands to humor their wives, but I would suggest that this is actually a separate teaching addressing men whose wives are not Christians, exhorting them not to use the “power” society grants them, but instead to follow the path of the powerless in winning them over. Because to use that power, Peter suggests, may hinder their prayers – i.e., damage their standing with God.

v8-22 Peter offers a kind of summation linking the teachings for specific groups within the community (the ostracized, slaves, and those whose spouses are unbelievers) that applies to the community as a whole.

v8 Peter lists what we might call “Fruits of the spirit,” or signs of the life of faith

v9 and then speaks of how to respond to evil; surprise! – not with power but with love.

This is pretty much the exact same thing Jesus says in Luke in the teaching that closes with the golden rule;

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. *Luke 6:27-31*

v10-12 Peter quotes Psalm 34 again (34:12-16) to summarize his main point – that unjust power can only be undone through love and perseverance. Actually, psalm 34 touches on many of the same themes that Peter does in this letter. Maybe it was one of his favorites.

v13-17 Here Peter is speaking about not giving into the judgments of wider society about one's self-worth. What do they fear? They fear for their social status and the opinions of others. Peter reminds us to worry only about the opinion of Jesus and also to be prepared to defend our choices in light of our faith commitments, but to not be self-righteous jerks about it.

v18-22 Peter offers a summation of Christ's atoning work that posits baptism as a kind of pledge or promise (nay, a covenant) between ourselves and God where we pledge to do our best to live out Jesus' example and God promises to empower and enable that commitment through our faith.

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1Peter Ch 4

v1-6 Chapter 4 picks up the thread from Peter's summation of Christ's atonement and closes out this section of teachings

v1-2 an exhortation to live as Christ died, immersed in God's will and not personal desire – God's greatness should be enough for us; we need not chase after our own.

v3-4 Again, this letter is intended for communities made up of followers who were Gentiles prior to their conversion. Peter here reminds them that what they have given up in order to follow Jesus wasn't all that fulfilling

v5 Peter reminds them that the balance of our lives will be measured at the dawn of Christ's new age.

v6 This opens up some interesting ideas about Christ's descent to the dead and the possibility for redemption even for those who have already died. It is a key underpinning of our own practice of prayers for the dead.

This may also suggest a post-death existence of some sort independent of the resurrection which Jesus and the Pharisees both taught. There is no real basis for any kind of post-death existence, spiritual or otherwise, in the Hebrew scriptures. Despite some strong beliefs by many, what exactly happens after our mortal deaths is not clearly explained in scripture and what is taught is oftentimes contradictory, which is why we came up with doctrines and beliefs like purgatory or limbo or the ideas that some special people get to live spiritually in the presence of God right away (saints) or that we all get a mansion in heaven.

v7-11 These verses seem like a good ending for this letter; its an exhortation reminding the followers to instill their faith with a sense of urgency, though clearly, Peter come up with a ps which is the rest of the letter.

v7 As was mentioned earlier, this letter is written at a time when the earlier sense of urgency about Jesus' return is giving way to an understanding that the eschaton may be a far future event necessitating the development of a faith and church structure for the long haul.

v8-11 Peter now offers some advice on how to act which are primarily aimed at relations within the Christian community. He is saying; here is how we hang together as we await;

- Seek what is best for one another
- Take care of each other's needs so that no one suffers need greater than others
- Bring your best yourselves to further the community
- Rely on God to give you what you need
- Remember to preach the gospel not just in words but in every action you take.

v12-19 After closing out his letter beautifully, Peter has some more thoughts pop into his head! His thoughts are related to what has come before though, and the rest of the book offers a series of short points touching again on what he's already written, but all aimed at encouraging the believers in their commitments to Jesus.

v12 Hey, of course you're facing some pushback for your choices; they are counter-cultural and people usually take that as a critique of their own choices - and no one likes that.

v13 But remember what it was that brought you to Jesus in the first place and hold onto that

v14 Because their pushback is a sure and certain sign that you are really living the way of Jesus!

v15-16 But hey, if you suffer for bad choices don't confuse that with suffering for faith

v17-19 So keep the faith; it is clearly working and one Christian at a time, on faith community at a time we are changing the world for the better because we are working with God to restore the "Good-Ness" of what God has made for us.

v18 a quote from Proverbs

If the righteous are repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner!

Prov 11:31

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1Peter Chapter 5

Peter continues his advice for conduct within the congregation as he finishes his letter, turning lastly to the role of the leaders of the congregation.

v1 Peter leans on his role as a long-time leader of the church as well as his history of being with Jesus during his earthly ministry to add extra authority to what he has to say.

This idea of apostolic authority is going to become important for the church; as we will see, it is the key theme of 2Peter, and it will become a major point of contention across the first several centuries of Christianity as the church works out its key tenets.

St Paul, also claims Christ's revelation to him as a source of his apostolic authority, but Peter would seem to have the stronger claim; too bad he wasn't more prolific.

v2 This verse appears to have been improved by later editors, as the earliest manuscripts leave out the phrases "exercising oversight" and "as God would have you do it." So the original may have been something like; "I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, not under compulsion, but willingly, not for sordid gain but eagerly."

I don't think the additions change the fundamental sentiment of the exhortation, but their addition may tell us something about the development of the early church.

First, the basic meaning suggests that there may have been some self-serving leaders in the church from the very beginning who manipulated the faithful for their own ends (some things never change). The additions, on the other hand, show the growing institutionalization of the church – the beginning of clerics as we might understand them, imbued with real organizational power understood to be derived, in some way, from Christ's own authority – in other words, the additions suggest the beginnings of ordination of leaders who are set apart, in fundamental ways, from the rest of the congregation.

v3-4 There is a long history and a continuing tendency for many ordained leaders to believe themselves part of a "higher order" of Christians and Peter, from the beginning, warns against it.

v5-6 Someone once told me that the definition of a leader is someone who is followed. Peter here seems to be arguing for good order within the congregation; not so much (I think) because the leaders always lead well but because it is necessary to work together to complete Christ's mission for us. And he calls upon the leaders, in turn (quoting from Proverbs 3:34, which was also quoted by James for a similar purpose), to not set themselves apart from or above the congregation for because it is important for the leadership to be grounded in the experience of the whole community.

v7 Clergy are still encouraged to be a non-anxious presence within the community in order to dampen hurtful passions and conflict.

v8-11 These verses are the end of the letter, what comes after is the salutation. Peter again returns to addressing the kind of social ostracization that is challenging the faith of many, reminding them that their experience is not unique, but that like all hard things, it is a trial best faced with others, in order to supply mutual support.

We clearly live in a time, when Christians are increasingly facing pushback from the wider community in a similar fashion to what these first Christians were facing. We are far from oppressed though, and still receive many cultural and institutional privileges. It should also be said that much of the cultural blowback is well deserved, at least here in the US, due to too many Christian leaders not living into Peter's advice in this letter to be humble and to put care and love for each other as our highest value.

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2 Peter – Introduction

Second Peter is one of the last books to enter into the canon of scripture and was hotly disputed both in the very early church and then later at the time of the Protestant Reformation. The general consensus is that this later was written long after Peter's death and is largely a reworking of the letter of Jude (more than 2/3 of Jude's verses are included in 2Peter).

Pseudepigraphical works (works written in the name of a famous author) are a not uncommon feature of ancient literature, but the similarities to Jude and its lack of established provenance made it a questionable work to many. It was eventually included in the canon, of course, largely on the weight of its (spurious) connection to Peter and because of its explicit defense of Apostolic witness as the basis for church doctrine.

The form of the book is similar to a genre of ancient literature known as Testament, that is a kind of farewell statement of advice given on the eve of death (as the author claims in 1:14). The basic theme of 2Peter is that the world is wholly corrupted and that only way to escape the coming destruction is through acceptance of the church's teachings.

In some ways, 2Peter would be a support for the later heretical doctrines of Gnostic Christianity which posited that the world was an evil plane of existence (ie, not created by God), that humans were spiritual beings trapped in human bodies, and that only through immersion in a secret body of knowledge (the gnosis) could one return to the pure spiritual state.

General Epistles

2Peter – Chapter 1

v1-2 These first verses are in a fairly typical form of greeting used in ancient letters. The author claims to be Peter the disciple of Jesus who is both a slave of Jesus, and an apostle (a messenger with authority).

v3-11 These verses are an opening exhortation calling on the reader (listeners) to redouble their efforts in following Jesus. These verses also lay out all of the themes of the letter as a whole.

- The importance of the knowledge of God
- The corruption of the world because of lust (greed)
- The need to be firm in our commitment to faith
- The power and reliability of God's promises

v3 God provides all that is needed by us, but this divine aid is only available through the "knowledge" of God which God has chosen to share with only a select few.

v4 Here the author says that we can become spiritual beings (participation in the divine nature) through acceptance of the truth of God's promises and thus escape the corrupted world.

It would seem that the word "lust" here stands in not just for sexual passion, but as a kind of general yearning after the rewards and pleasures of the material world.

v5-7 Here the author connects the "knowledge" of God to ethical considerations; i.e.; that our commitment to Jesus should lead to moral improvement.

v8-9 If our knowledge of God does not drive us towards said moral improvement, than perhaps, the author suggests, we don't really "know" Christ at all and we will fall short of redemption.

v10-11 But if we are continually striving to be more Christ-like then we will receive the eternal life promised by Jesus.

v12-21 In the second half of this first chapter, the author makes three appeals to what we call the apostolic tradition as the proper guideposts for the church moving forward.

v12-15 The author's first appeal is to the experience of Peter's life; his dedication and faithfulness displayed throughout his life as he now approaches the end of that life.

v16-18 The second appeal is based on Peter's being present for the Transfiguration, where Jesus' true nature was revealed, and God spoke from the clouds.

v19-21 the final appeal is to the witness of the Hebrew scriptures, especially the words of the prophets.

So, this first chapter lays out the essential problem (sinfulness driven by worldly temptation) and offers an answer; commitment to the way of Christ as a means to overcome the dangers.

The real question facing the church at the time the letter was written (late 1st or early 2nd century) was "how do we know what Christ's way actually is?"

I think we tend to not appreciate the crisis felt throughout the church when Jesus' return proved to be not as imminent as many expected. The urgency of Paul's message and the expectation of the early church must have faced intense skepticism as the first generation of witnesses and apostles began to die without their expectations coming to pass.

This letter is speaking to that crisis of faith as the church, as a body, needed to reorient their expectations which led to a widespread questioning and interrogation of who Jesus was, what his teachings actually were (and meant), and what it might mean for those who sought an escape from the pressing challenges of their lives. This feeling is prefigured and wonderfully captured in an exchange between the disciples and Jesus from Matthew (19:23-27 *NIV*)

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

The first three centuries of Christianity contained a number of different movements and alternate interpretations of Jesus that essentially sought to provide an answer to Peter's question above; "what then will there be for us?"

They are too many to enumerate here, but ultimately, the view that predominated after much conflict, was the one this letter argues for; to trust in those who knew Jesus (Paul is an interesting case here), to believe their testimony and what they said happened and how they interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures.

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2Peter – Chapter 2

In the first chapter, the author offered three points on which he believed faith should be grounded; the example of his life (and by extension, those of the other apostles), the testimonies of those who were witnesses to Jesus' early life, and to the apostolic interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures (especially the Prophets). In short, the Apostolic Tradition.

If the best defense is a good offense, then this second chapter seeks to defend the apostolic tradition against those who offer a different perspective whom the author calls "false teachers." It is this part of 2Peter that borrows most heavily from Jude.

v1 Looking back at the history of Israel, the author draws a parallel to the false prophets of ancient Israel who led the kings astray and those who would lead the followers of Jesus astray, implying the same result – utter destruction.

Here is an example from Ezekiel

The word of the LORD came to me:

Mortal, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are prophesying; say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: "Hear the word of the LORD!" Thus says the Lord GOD, Alas for the senseless prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! Your prophets have been like jackals among ruins, O Israel. You have not gone up into the breaches, or repaired a wall for the house of Israel, so that it might stand in battle on the day of the LORD. They have envisioned falsehood and lying divination; they say, "Says the LORD," when the LORD has not sent them, and yet they wait for the fulfillment of their word! Have you not seen a false vision or uttered a lying divination, when you have said, "Says the LORD," even though I did not speak? Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD: Because you have uttered falsehood and envisioned lies, I am against you, says the Lord GOD. My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations; they shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel; and you shall know that I am the Lord GOD. Because, in truth, because they have misled my people, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear whitewash on it. Say to those who smear whitewash on it that it shall fall. There will be a deluge of rain, great hailstones will fall, and a stormy wind will break out. When the wall falls, will it not be said to you, "Where is the whitewash you smeared on it?"

Ezekiel 13:1-12

v2-3 Despite their lies though, many will follow the false prophets or teachers (or in our day, pundits) because they say things people want to hear. They make the complex sound simple, the difficult things easy, and they promise free their hearers from the consequences of their own choice and to turn their vices to virtues. And they do it in order to promote themselves.

But, it goes on to say, that their words and false promises will be their undoing (eventually) but in the meantime, they will cause a lot of havoc.

v4-10 This is actually one really long sentence (the author must have gone to St Paul's school of writing 😊). The gist is that the scriptures show that reality can only be bucked for so long before it comes roaring back to undo its deniers, and our reality is that the whole of creation is underpinned by God and God cannot be defied without consequences.

I should also point out that the original Greek does not say "hell" in v4 but actually says "Tartarus," which in Greek mythology was a deep abyss (even deeper than Hades) where the souls of the wicked were condemned as well as being the prison for the Titans (the pre-Olympian gods who were overthrown and deposed by Zeus and Co.)

Hell is a bit of a late-comer to Christian cosmology and is not actually ever mentioned in scriptures, and pretty much never at all in the Hebrew Scriptures. Tartarus is one of the words often *translated* as hell, but "hell" itself is absent. The other words often translated as hell are Sheol (the home of the dead in Jewish mythology), Hades (the home of the dead in Greek mythology), and Gehenna (the perpetually burning city dump of ancient Jerusalem).

Also, since this book (and Jude from which it "borrows") are written before Revelations, the mention of angels who sin probably isn't referring to those who followed Satan in his rebellion, but probably may be a reference to the "sons of God" who had sex with human women in chapter 6 of Genesis who were linked to rebellious angels in the non-canonical book of Enoch which was an apocalyptic book written a century or so before Jesus' time.

v11 This is a little obscure, but if we look to Jude, it is clear that he is referring to an episode in the book of Enoch where the archangel Michael battles with Satan over the body of Moses, but refuses to judge Satan himself, as only God can judge.

Basically, the gist here is that the false teachers do not take seriously the powers of Evil, to their own detriment.

v12-14 These false teachers are VERY BAD!

- they are almost less than human in their self-involved depravity
- they make light of evil powers, which will eventually consume them as well
- they make a mockery of the gatherings of the community (eucharist)
 - verse 13 contains a little wordplay contrasting the Greek words *apatais* and *agapais*, which are respectively, their lies and the love feasts of the church.

Also to note: The argument type used here is *ad hominem*; which is to say that it rests on convincing the listener/reader that the teachers themselves are bad people without ever actually saying what the teaching is or why it is incorrect. This has too often been, unfortunately, the preferred argument type used to promote Christian doctrine and teaching – clearly just in IMHO.

v15-16 In Numbers, Balaam (a prophet) is paid by the enemies of Israel to curse them, but God only allows him to bless Israel, to the consternation of his employers. There was a non-Biblical tradition that painted Balaam as greedy and self-serving, hence the reference here.

v17-22 The false teachers are especially bad because they entice those who have been rescued from bondage to return to slavery.

The first quote is from Proverbs 26:11, while the second is a paraphrase of something written by the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (who lived ~50-135)
this is a clue suggestive of the period to when 2Peter may have been written

[A Fool is] Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to its folly – Prov 26:11

General Epistles

2Peter – chapter 3

v1-4 Again, the author seeks to link himself to Peter (ie; a “second” letter) and to reiterate why the communities should continue to trust their leaders even though they may have been wrong about Jesus’ imminent return. This time with two arguments that are similar to those used in the previous chapter, namely;

- Believe our interpretation of the prophets
- Believe our testimony about Jesus’ teachings

v5-7 these verses serve to refute the claim that things have always been the same “from the beginning of creation.” I.e.; the world has *not* been the same, because it was once destroyed in great flood and was *re-created* so that it could be destroyed by fire! (Ha! – take that you false teachers)

In my opinion, this isn’t a very good argument as it relies on accepting that the world was created by God and that it was destroyed in a flood, neither of which is “provable” in any meaningful empirical sense. At least St Paul was willing to admit that faith can’t rest on empirical truths.

As to the mention of fire, there was an idea within Judaic thought of this era that there were to be two ordained universal cataclysms; the one in the past as recounted in the Noah story and a future one with fire. We will remember that Jesus often uses fire when speaking of the coming judgment.

Mostly I am reminded of the Robert Frost poem Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

v8-9 Here is an allusion to psalm 90, verse 4

*For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past *
and like a watch in the night.*

Which is to say that God works on a much bigger timeframe than humans can comprehend. As, well, Christ's delay opens the opportunity to bring into God's community more people.

v10-14 And, the author suggests, no matter if the apostles misjudged the timing of the thing, the day of judgment *is* coming and we know not when, so best to be always prepared and not put off to some future age, our whole-hearted commitment to the way of Jesus.

v14-18 The author wraps up the letter on a more positive tone, urging everyone to remain committed to Jesus and to live lives rooted in the example of His own.

The words about Paul are kind of interesting. In Paul's own letters he was often disparaging towards Peter, so it seems unlikely that the actual Peter would talk so warmly of his teachings.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned Galatians 2:11

It isn't clear which teachings of Paul are being twisted, perhaps those on freedom and the lapsing of the Law's authority or perhaps it is Paul's sense of Jesus' imminent return, or perhaps his disdain of the material world and human sexuality. At any rate, the author is correct, that understanding is dependent upon good formation and teaching.

But perhaps the most interesting is the conflation of Paul's letters with scripture, again suggesting a much later date of writing than Peter's lifetime.

General Epistles

The Johannine Epistles

The three “books” known as 1,2, & 3 John are believed by most scholars to have come from the same community or communities that created the Gospel of John. The author of these three works at no point identifies himself except as “the Elder.” Similarly, the author of the Gospel of John does not identify themselves. But it is apparent from the language and themes, that these three works are written by someone steeped in the language and theology of John’s gospel.

Tradition has long associated the gospel of John with the apostle John, and many scholars believe that the gospel, as we have it today, is a work that has at its core the testimony of one of Jesus’ disciples, but which has undergone extensive amendment and revision. It is very possible then that these epistles were written by one of those who revised and expanded upon the Gospel.

Eusebius, a 4th century historian of the church (and an archbishop) claimed that the author of these apostles was not the disciple John, but one of that John’s disciples who was known as John the elder. Assuming the scholars are, at least, mostly right, that means these letters were probably written sometime in the last decade of the first century.

The occasion of the letters involves a conflict within a group of churches which have, prior to the time of the letter, worked collectively and within some sort of hierarchy. The exact points of conflict aren’t made explicit, but the letters do offer clues that the conflict centers around the nature of Christ and the meaning of the “Good News.”

It isn’t known in what order these epistles were written, their titles were given centuries after they were first written, but they are organized by length. One suggestion, that I particularly like, is that the three were originally part of a letter packet sent out from the “home” church of this network to the other congregations. In this hypothesis, 1John (which isn’t a letter at all) was a tract meant to be read aloud in the congregations concerning the conflict, 2John is the cover letter for the tract, intended for the various leaders of the congregations, and 3 John as a personal note to the leader Gaius, commiserating over another of the leaders who is rejecting “the elders” authority.

General Epistles

1John – Chapter 1

v1-4 These opening verses provide an both an assurance of faith and an explanation for why the particular teachings of this tradition should be followed.

The first clause “what was from the beginning” seems to be a clear allusion to the opening of John’s gospel;

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

He goes on to base his teaching on three things;

what he has heard

what he has seen

what he has touched (this also suggests the author is reinforcing the material reality of Jesus)

And he justifies his authority, saying in essence, these experiences and this understanding was given to me by God, expressly that it might be shared with “you.”

v5 Besides being the source for a great hymn, this draws on earlier allusions on the Hebrew scriptures that connect God with Light, which is to say that way of God is illuminating; makes things known, it is wisdom, etc...

v6-7 This language is very similar to what we find in John’s gospel, especially in chapter 3, but there’s several ideas packed into these 2 verses, such as;

- If we are not open to the wisdom of God, ie; if we don’t live within God’s will then we aren’t really in relationship with God.
- followers of Jesus are connected to one another *through* our mutual relationships with God; ie we are made a people (an extended family, if you will), through our shared relationship with Jesus and love of God – most importantly we should be ONE people
- As Christians, we cannot claim personal righteousness or perfection, but through the work of Jesus on our behalf, we maintain our good relationship with God the Father

v8-10 Much of this simply restates what has already been written, but likely also addresses the conflict impacting these communities – notably concerning the problem of sin.

Sin, Jesus suggests in his teaching, isn't about strictly following the rules of the law or not. Rather, sin is about whether or not we embody God's command to love or not. Being human, we need to acknowledge that we do not perfectly live into that command at all times and that we need to acknowledge that truth as a key part of amending our lives to more closely follow Jesus' example.

This suggests that the conflict concerns differing views of sin (whether its actually a problem or not) and of Jesus' power to intercede.

We may recall that some gnostic Christians held that sin wasn't an issue at all because they believed the whole of creation wasn't of God, therefore what one does in this mortal realm has no affect on one's true spiritual self. Many also didn't believe that Christ and Jesus were the same person and denied Christ's death from Jesus' crucifixion.

General Epistles

1John – Chapter 2

v1 Since our sins impair our relationship with God, Jesus is our defender before God the Father. This idea of Jesus as an *Advocate* for humanity is mentioned at several points in the gospel of John (but not elsewhere).

v2 understanding Jesus as the Lamb of God, i.e.; meant for sacrifice is also a prominent idea in John's gospel and again not so explicitly in the other Gospels. Also important is that "for the sins of the whole world" represents a unifying vision of Christianity

v3-6 Basically here the author is saying; to follow Jesus means to follow his example in our own lives

v7-11 Bearing in mind that the author is seeking to address a serious conflict within the communities; he wants the community to see that continued adherence to the way of Jesus – as taught by the author and other fellow leaders – remains the truest and best response to Jesus. He also gets in what looks like an attack on his opponents, namely that those who would seek to upset and divide the community are not true followers of Jesus, suggesting that whatever the issue is, it concerns something of significance and fundamental about the communities understanding.

v12-14 The author puts the next section in verse, suggesting it may have been adapted from something else (a liturgy) that the people would have known well. It follows a cycle of address that is children-fathers-young people, in two cycles that say different versions of the same sentiment.

v15-17 The author has a pretty strong anti-materialist bent that comes out here as he contrasts the way of Jesus with the way of the "world," suggesting that the "world" is somehow irredeemably corrupted.

This is, of course, a view that has had much support within Christianity over the years.

v18 The author introduces a new term, anti-christ, though not necessarily as an individual but as a type. As we've discussed before, the very early church possessed a keen sense of urgency and belief concerning Jesus' return; namely that it was more imminent than it has proved to be so far. Based on Jesus' own teachings that false teachers and prophets would arise and that some would come in his name or claiming

to be Him before his return reinforced the idea to this author and community that in this deep conflict they were seeing Jesus' warning coming to pass.

v19 Here the author is speaking to those who are causing the conflict by rejecting the authority of the church's leadership. The suggestion here is that some have chosen to leave the community but are still working to lead others out to join them.

v20-22 The author here is seeking to bolster the commitment of those who have remained and to "inoculate" them against the entreaties of the schismatics.

v23-25 Continuing the effort to hold on to the committed, the author again returns to the case that the consistency of the message from the leaders gives it greater weight; it is not an innovation and whatever the "others" are arguing is clearly made up by them and not in accord with the previous teachings and thus not in accord with God.

It is likely that the counterargument is that Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would teach us new things and lead us into new understandings.

I think we can see from our own history that sometimes the Spirit does lead us into new understandings, while also broadly adhering to the spirit and tenor of previous teachings. That is, these are usually *expansions* of previous tenets and not *innovations*.

v26-29 Though the author uses some strong language (anti-christs) the arguments here are better than the ones we saw in 2Peter because they are intended to confirm the faith experiences the listener/reader has already had and seeks to build them up rather than working to just tear down their opponents. This will be the tenor of most of the rest of this letter.