

The Apostle Peter

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A disciple of Jesus and apostle of the early Church.

Disciple

Early Days

Occasional references to Peter's original name Simon (Gk *Symeōn*; see Acts 15:14; 2 Pet. 1:1 in one MS tradition) show that he belonged to the Jewish community. His home was in Galilee, at Bethsaida (John 1:44). While this locality was Jewish, it was also cosmopolitan. Both Andrew, Peter's brother, and Philip, who also came from Bethsaida, bear Greek names; and the bilingual setting arising from Greek culture explains why Simon became his adopted name.

His father's name was Jonah = John (Matt. 16:17; John 1:42). At some unspecified point in his life he had married (Mark 1:30) a wife who in later days accompanied him on his missionary tours, evidently to Corinth, where she was known (1 Cor. 9:5).

His trade, both at Bethsaida on the east bank of the Jordan River and at Capernaum, a port on Lake Gennesaret, was fishing (Mark 1:16–21). Luke 5:1–11 indicates something of this trade, which he resumed for a while in the later part of the gospel story (John 21:1–3).

Concerning his cultural attainments, Acts 4:13 should not be pressed unduly. Probably, the description of Peter and John as "uneducated, common men" means no more than that they were ignorant of the finer points of the rabbinical interpretation of the Jewish Torah. Exposure to Hellenistic culture in Bethsaida is a counterbalancing argument in favor of Peter's general education. He spoke his native language with a special, recognizable accent (Mark 14:70; Matt. 26:73).

¹ This article is taken from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Both Peter and his brother Andrew were followers of John the Baptist (John 1:40–42), as indeed were a considerable number of the original disciples (Acts 1:22) before their call to service by Jesus.

Call to Discipleship

The Gospel of John preserves an authentic tradition of Jesus' Judean ministry, part of which included the summons of John 1:40–42. This context has the first replacement of the name "Simon" by "Peter." This was to be his new name, symbolizing a change of character. Hereafter he would be a new man, consolidated by his relationship to Christ his Lord. The name is probably proleptic (the representation of a thing as existing before it actually does or did so), anticipating the time when Peter would take his place as a pillar apostle (Gal. 2:9) and a foundation stone, which he and the other apostles were to be as original witnesses to the gospel (Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14). "Cephas" is Paul's normal appellation of him, except in Gal. 2:7f.

The reference to Cephas in 1 Cor. 15:5 is important in this context. There is general agreement that Paul here quotes from a Jewish-Christian (or less likely a Hellenistic-Christian) creed that he received from his predecessors, probably Jewish-Christian believers. If so, the use of the Semitic name Cephas in the post-Resurrection appearance to Peter bears witness to the time when the name-changing took place, suggesting that it was as the risen Lord showed Himself to "Simon" (cf. Luke 24:34: "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon") that Simon became Cephas (or Peter, as the name became rendered into Greek). This suggestion is taken up in Matt. 16 and explains the importance of Peter's confession.

The first introduction to Jesus in Judea makes more intelligible the subsequent response Peter made when Jesus called him to abandon his trade and become His full-time disciple (Mark 1:16f; 10:28; an expanded version of this call is in Luke 5:1–11). A further invitation to belong

to the inner group of the Twelve is given in Mark 3:13ff, and the new name is mentioned at that time. Mark calls him Simon up to 3:16; thereafter Mark refers to him as Peter.

Role in Jesus' Ministry

Still another honor was his as Jesus permitted a group of three disciples to accompany Him on special occasions. Peter is included in the trio along with James and John (see Mark 5:37; 9:2; 13:3; 14:33). In the lists of the Twelve, Peter stands at the head (Mark 3:16, etc.; cf. Acts 1:13).

Mark's Gospel has a distinctive role for Peter. Although he is ranked as the first of the disciples and is regarded as the chief spokesperson of the Twelve, Mark singles him out for blame at critical points in the narrative.

At Mark 1:35–37 Peter leads the way to find Jesus and tries to press on Him the role of a popular teacher. At Caesarea Philippi (8:27–33) Jesus receives Peter's confession of Messiahship with a certain reserve, and announces that Peter's subsequent remonstrance is the work of Satan. The following incident of the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2–10) contains at least one puzzling verse (6): in response to Peter's suggestion to erect three booths, the parenthetical note says, "For he did not know what he should answer." Strictly taken, this statement suggests that there was an implied rebuke, and Peter is dumbfounded and unable to respond.

Other examples of Peter's role being less than flattering are his being singled out for reproach in Gethsemane (Mark 14:37) and his denials (Mark 14:66–72), which are recounted in such a way as to include the suspicion that he may have "cursed" his Lord (v 71) — a cardinal offense in the early Church (1 Cor. 12:3). There is a brighter side in the promise of Mark 16:7 — unique to this Gospel — when the risen Lord sends a message to Peter.

At face value, Mark was being painfully honest in portraying Peter's humanity and weakness, and eventual recovery. But perhaps this

passage shows an early stage of the story of Peter, one in which his subsequent glory as martyr and apostolic hero has not yet thrown its light on this first phase of his relationship with his master.

Matthew's Gospel offers a picture of Peter modified by ecclesiastical developments. We can see this trend in the way Peter is made more prominent as inspired leader and the disciple credited with a role of intermediary between Jesus and the other members of the Twelve (see Matt. 15:15; 17:24–27; 18:21f). In two special incidents Peter plays a unique role, both in action (14:23–33) and in word (16:17–19).

The first, the "walking on the water" incident, which in Matthew's account includes Peter's request to accompany Jesus and his subsequent lapse of faith, is part of this Evangelist's intention to show both the dignity and the frailty of Peter. Because his weakness is only too apparent, it cannot be that Matthew wishes to exalt him as the uniquely preeminent apostle, even if Matthew does give Peter a distinctive status. More likely is the view that Peter here is a typical disciple who achieves greatness only in dependence on the Lord. His role is exactly that of "spokesman for the Twelve," not more nor less (Peter, pp. 23–27). Yet it cannot be denied that the enlarged pericope (an extract from a text, especially a passage from the Bible) is introduced for hortatory (aiming to exhort) purposes, with Peter playing the role of the model disciple who looks to his Lord in time of danger.

The confession at Caesarea Philippi (Acts 16:17–19) is more problematical. The authenticity of the pericope has been challenged on textual grounds. A. von Harnack tried to show that the passage is an interpolation into the original text, made at Rome in the time of Hadrian (A.D. 117–138). But this is a vain plea, without any external support. Moreover, the Semitic coloring of the passage testifies to its primitive character.

A second argument objects that linguistically the term for “church” (Gk *ekklēsia*) is an anachronism. Linguistic researches show, however, that the true equivalent of *ekklēsia* is the Heb עֵבְדָה (“assembly”) or Aramaic *kenîštā* (“gathering”). Thus it is more appropriate to translate the Greek word by “people of God” than “church”, in this way meeting the argument that Jesus could not have envisioned an institutional body when using the words recorded in Matt. 16:18 and 18:17. No such concept is required, since He more reasonably had in view the eschatological people of God that He had come to gather in His ministry and beyond.

A third objection raises the issue of the subsequent history of the Church. It is said that Peter did not occupy the authoritative position that this statement of Jesus in v 19 would inevitably have secured for him. The argument hinges on the meaning of the “power of the keys”. Evidently what is meant here is “the spiritual insight which will enable Peter to lead others in through the door of revelation through which he has passed himself”; and this “key” was not the exclusive possession of Peter— even if Matt. 16:19 contains a promise directed particularly to him — though on the day of Pentecost by common consent he was the first to use it. And in Acts 10 he opened the door of faith to Cornelius as the firstfruits of the Gentile mission (see Acts 11:18).

Peter’s confession was the turning point in Jesus’ ministry. To him was accorded by divine revelation the insight into the mystery of Jesus’ person, whom he acknowledged as Israel’s Messiah and the divine Son. The subsequent rebuke (Matt. 16:21–23) is directly related to Peter’s misunderstanding of what Messiahship involved and his attempt to dissuade Jesus from the path to the cross. Mark preserves the vivid narration (Mark 8:32f) that exposes Peter’s frail humanity, which was open to Satanic influence and resulted in his becoming the mouthpiece of Jesus’ enemy, once defeated in the wilderness temptation (Matt. 4:1–11).

On the other hand, Matthew’s account of the incident at Caesarea Philippi, by its inclusion of Peter’s faith in Jesus as Son of God and the expression of praise he received as the rock, does give the apostle a special place in the divine economy. This description has suggested to some scholars that the locus of the revelation (Matt. 16:17) and the conferring of the honor as “rock” -man is better placed in the time of the Resurrection appearances.

Such a dislocation of the Gospel narrative cannot be supported from the text itself, which, however, may hold some hints that Peter’s attestation of faith looks forward to the situation as it developed in the later Church, especially Matthew’s church, where Peter was evidently a revered teacher.

Matthew may well have been regarded as an honored teacher in that situation (cf. 13:52), so it is not surprising that he would wish to exalt Peter’s role and so claim apostolic sanction for those elements in his Gospel that set out answers to pressing issues in his day, namely, the opposition of Pharisaic Judaism in the post-Jamnia period and the inroads of antinomian—and maybe charismatic—leaders who were challenging Matthew’s authority as a church teacher.

The appeal to Peter’s office (at Antioch?) would therefore be important in the shaping of the Gospel tradition in the church of Matthew’s constituency. M. Hengel (*Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*) has argued that the church at Antioch came increasingly under Peter’s influence after Paul had declared his position regarding gentile freedom from the Jewish kosher laws and suffered a sense of isolation from his Syrian base. Hengel thus accounts for the special role played by Peter in Matthew (14:28f; 16:16–19; 17:24; 18:21) and suggests that Antioch was the home of both that Gospel and its teaching on Peter’s status.

An integral part of the confession at Caesarea Philippi is the subsequent experience of the Transfiguration (note the date-connection, so rare in the Gospels, Mark 9:2 par). Peter is

again spokesperson for the three, and again misguided and fallible (Mark 9:5). Later reflection showed the reality of this vision, and Peter benefited from hindsight (1 Pet. 5:1; 2 Pet. 1:16–18). His proud claims to loyalty are shown up as hollow mockery by the events in Gethsemane, and his threefold denial (Mark 14:66–72) is painfully told. The end is not without hope, for the promise (Mark 14:28) is confirmed by a personal message to Peter (Mark 16:7) and is followed by a personal appearance of the living Christ (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5).

Apostle

After Pentecost Peter became the leading figure in the apostolic Church. Here we are in touch with the role of Peter in Luke's description of Christianity. The Gospel of Luke portrays Peter in a more favorable light than Mark's account. There is no rebuke of Peter for his false messianic presuppositions (Luke 9:20–22), and Luke has Peter's confession in a limpid, verbless form as though to make it a prototype creed of the Church.

Peter's eventual restoration is given more shape in the garden scene (Luke 22:31f), and Peter's role as leader is clearly to the fore, as part of Luke's interest in what has been termed the first exercise in "pastoral theology". Luke's depiction of Peter emphasizes the paroetic (emphasizing exhortation) elements in his character (esp. in Luke 5:1–11) as a prelude to Luke's fuller description of him in Acts as church leader and Jewish-Christian missionary.

Acts 1–12 shows that Peter was clearly the dominant influence, both in decision making and public preaching (see 1:15–22; 2:14–40; 3:12–26).

Before the Jewish authorities (Acts 4:5ff) Peter is spokesperson; and his many-sided role included that of forceful leader (Luke 5:1–11) and miracle worker (Luke 5:15). The Holy Spirit's endowment of the apostle is the explanation, and it is this factor that accounts for the dramatic change between Peter's

character in Gethsemane and in the courtyard and his new boldness (Luke 4:13) as a Christian witness.

Peter is presented as a church leader in his handling of the situation at Samaria and his encounter with Simon (Acts 8:14–24). The historian evidently decided to give prominence to the conversion of Cornelius by the way the narrative is set down, with great fullness of detail and repetition for emphasis (Acts 10–11). Peter's Jewish susceptibilities were overcome and his convictions redirected as he came to learn that "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34) and that Gentiles such as Cornelius were suitable recipients of the gospel message, offered and received on the basis of trust in Christ, without any ceremonial requirement.

Peter's sermon, dramatically cut short (Acts 11:15) by the gracious interposition of God (Acts 10:44–47), announced the good news, which was accepted gratefully and movingly. Peter's association with the embryonic gentile mission is clear. Luke evidently wanted to depict him as a link between Jewish Christianity (which in Luke's day was part of past history, yet still important as demonstrating the Jewish origins of the Church in the salvation-historical process) and the now dominant gentile Christianity.

But Peter's sympathies lay more with a mission to his Jewish compatriots, if we place the concordat with Paul (Gal. 2:7–10) in the period before the Jerusalem Council. His native weakness peeps through in the vacillations he practiced at Antioch, and he needed the stern reproof of Paul (Gal. 2:14–21). If Galatians is a pre-Council letter, written A.D. 48–49, subsequent events at Jerusalem show that Peter profited from this rebuke, as is demonstrated by his gentile interest in 1 Peter.

Peter's arrest in Jerusalem at an earlier date (Acts 12:1–17) led to imprisonment and marvelous release. The apparent hopelessness of his plight as a prisoner of Herod is described to highlight the need for him to leave Jerusalem.

This he did, and “departed and went to another place” (v 17).

The role of Peter at the Jerusalem Council is a matter of continuing debate. One likely view is that we should separate the discussion in Acts 15:1–19 from what is reported in the later verses that describe the formulation and propagating of the so-called decree. The mutual agreements in the first part of the narrative that united Peter and Paul, who had already sealed an agreement in the meeting of Gal. 2:4, 7, were ratified by James on the basis of his appeal to Amos 9:11f (LXX).

This proposal by James was in the interests of gentile freedom and access to the gospel without Jewish restrictions. The details of the decree spelled out in the subsequent verses, however, relate to the single item of table fellowship. Paul and Peter may not have been present when the decree was announced, since Paul never alludes to it in his letters and James’s reference to it in Acts 21:18–25 carries the impression that it is announced as something new to Paul.

This reconstruction, which has some problems, notably the presence of the apostles’ names in Acts 15:22, 25f (though it should be observed that the decree is committed to Judas and Silas to transmit), explains one feature regarding Peter’s behavior at Antioch. It was the Jewish Christians who, armed with the decree, attacked Peter’s lax table fellowship and occasioned Peter’s vacillation (Gal. 2:13f). The issue was whether Jewish laws were binding on gentile believers.

Under pressure, Peter and Barnabas gave in when faced with the explicit terms of the decree and they in turn tried to enforce it on the Antioch congregation. Paul regarded this action as a betrayal of the gospel and a move away from the concordat of Gal. 2:1–10 made earlier. Paul’s position hardened at this juncture; it set him in opposition to the “pillar” apostles, whose emissaries we may see in 2 Cor. 10–13, and isolated him from Antioch, where Peter’s influence continued and became canonized in

the publication of Matthew’s Gospel some decades later.

Aside from a brief reappearance at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:7–11), Peter now vanishes from the NT story of the Church. Attempts have been made to argue that he left Jerusalem for Rome, there to become the first bishop. But these are countered by the fact that, when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he had no knowledge of Peter’s presence in the imperial city; and Roman Catholic writers have become more flexible in leaving this identification of “another place” with Rome as an open question. No certain answer is possible; the text may mean no more than that Peter temporarily left the Christian meeting place.

The rise of James in his absence, however, requires that Peter soon moved away from the Holy City and engaged in missionary work elsewhere (Gal. 2:9), possibly Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12) and the regions of Pontus-Bithynia (1 Pet. 1:1). If the historical reconstruction made earlier has some cogency to it, Peter made his home in Antioch and acted as an intermediary between two factions, the Jewish Christianity led by James and the gentile congregation established by the apostle Paul. Peter’s subsequent arrival in Rome is clearly attested, and the bond between Rome and communities of Asia Minor (seen in 1 Peter) is equally well established.

Martyr

The apostolic authorship of 1 Peter requires that Peter wrote his Epistle from Rome, if (as is very likely) “Babylon” in 1 Pet. 5:13, conceals the name of the imperial city. The link between Peter and Rome is firmly made in 1 Peter, even if we see that document as a deposit or testament of Peter’s teaching collected by a member of his school, either in his later life (Silvanus is usually the name associated with the activity of an amanuensis) or after his lifetime.

Contemporary study of 2 Peter views it as a later record of that Petrine school in the final decades of the 1st century. Dating 2 Peter is problematical, but it does seem clear that all the data — literary, tradition-historical, and theological — point to Rome as the setting and place of publication of “Peter’s testament,” which is enshrined, if considerably modified, in that letter.

Christian tradition speaks with a divided voice about Peter’s stay in Rome. Irenaeus makes the two apostles Peter and Paul the founders of the church there, but this cannot be so, in view of Paul’s letter in A.D. 55 or 58 to the Roman church, which he had not then visited (Rom. 1:13). More reliably, Eusebius witnesses to the cooperative work of the two men in Italy when Paul was a prisoner there, presumably the period described at the close of Acts.

The Neronian persecution in A.D. 65 marks the turning point, though our sources of information about the apostles are not clear. 1 Clement 5–6 speaks of Christian martyrs at Rome in such a way as to fit the description of Tacitus (Ann. xv.44) that it was during Nero’s pogrom that Paul and Peter perished. This would preclude any release of Paul and further ministry after Acts 28, unless the date of the two-year confinement in “free custody” is brought forward to make possible a release and further missionary work in the West.

Many scholars accept the direct evidence of 1Clem. 5–6 and insist that the two apostles were martyred in Nero’s outburst. But there is a way to steer a middle course through these conflicting church traditions. J. J. Gunther (Paul: Messenger and Exile [1972], ch 6) argues that Paul was tried and sentenced to exile at the close of his detention in Rome (Acts 28). When he heard of the fire at Rome in A.D. 64 he returned to the city and was rearrested and executed in the following year along with Peter.

The tradition that Peter was crucified head downward (found in the apocryphal Acts of Peter) appears to be an embroidered version of John 21:18f.

Evidently the burial sites of the apostles were well known, according to Eusebius, who quotes Gaius, at the time of Bishop Zephyrinus, A.D. 198–217: “You will find the trophies of those who founded this church.” The maximum conclusion to be drawn from these Vatican excavations is that Peter’s memorial was cherished near the spot where he died. His body was never recovered — therefore all talk of Peter’s bones is chimerical (in spite of the announcement by Pope Paul VI on June 26, 1968, that such a discovery and identification had been made; see G. F. Snyder, BA, 32 [1969], 2–24) — but with the later concern for relics Christians piously believed, for apologetical reasons, that his exact grave could be located (O’Connor, p. 209).