

SUMMER 2009

Religion and Spirituality (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality.aspx)

The Birth of a Legend

Peter Nathan

How did early traditions concerning the apostle Peter become so entrenched that by the third century he had come to be the source of all power within the church at Rome?

Pope Benedict XVI presides over the Roman Catholic Church from what is known as the Chair of Peter, which encloses what the Vatican claims to be the actual chair in which the apostle sat nearly two thousand years ago. When a pope speaks from this chair, or *ex cathedra*, his official pronouncements are considered infallible.

All Catholic arguments with regard to the primacy of the pope and of the Roman church as a whole are based on the fundamental assertion that Christ established that church through [the apostle Peter \(/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-peter-in-rome/5820.aspx\)](/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-peter-in-rome/5820.aspx), and that Peter became the first bishop of Rome and thus pope. Yet as noted in a previous article, today's established belief that Peter lived and died in that city ultimately rests on a particular interpretation of a piece of late-first-century correspondence. The letter does not actually state that Peter had ever visited the city, however, much less that he had been martyred there. That idea can be read into the text only by someone who already holds those beliefs. Further, the

New Testament writers are largely silent on the geographic areas in which Peter preached (with Rome never being mentioned in that context), and they are totally silent on where he died.

How, then, did the collection of myths and legends surrounding the apostle grow so that he was eventually hailed as the first pope?

CONFLICTING REPORTS

Explicit reports of Peter having been in Rome began about a hundred years after his death. In the 190s Irenaeus, a bishop who spent time in Rome before becoming overseer of the church in Gaul, wrote a treatise commonly known as *Against All Heresies* in which he referred to Peter's presence in the imperial capital.

The bishop wrote: "Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter."

Irenaeus, who was obviously not an eyewitness, appears to have had as his source a statement by Papias, who in the early part of the second century had outlined the writing of the Gospel accounts. We know the works of Papias only to the extent that they have been quoted by later writers such as Irenaeus and, more significantly, the late-third- to fourth-century bishop [Eusebius](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-eusebius-pamphilus/537.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-eusebius-pamphilus/537.aspx>) in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Like Irenaeus, Eusebius was an adherent and advocate of the Roman imperial version of Christianity, which by his time had become dominant. He directly quoted Papias on Mark's dealings with Peter:

"Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.' These things are related by Papias concerning Mark," Eusebius declared.

Note that Papias made no comment about Peter being in Rome. That *Mark* went to the imperial capital is established in Paul's second letter to Timothy, in which the apostle requested that Timothy bring Mark to him in Rome, where Paul was imprisoned (2 Timothy 4:11). But if, as many claim, Peter was also in Rome and Mark was with him, why would Paul need Timothy to *bring* him to Rome? Further, if Peter was preaching in Rome, why would the church there need Mark to provide a written record of those teachings? Clement or any of those present could have compiled firsthand notes and produced a Gospel account. More plausible is that, with Mark arriving in Rome to attend to Paul's needs, he provided the church with news of what Peter was preaching elsewhere—news that he was uniquely suited to provide.

ANALYZING THE DATA

So we have two Catholic writers alluding to Papias—Irenaeus in the second century and Eusebius in the fourth. Clearly Eusebius represented his statement as a verbatim quote, indicating that he must have had Papias's work to hand (and scholars have established as much). If Papias had said anything about Peter being in Rome, it would have been to Eusebius's benefit to quote that; indeed, he was always eager to quote material relating to the apostles. The fact that he didn't clearly suggests that Papias never commented on Peter's whereabouts, at least insofar as it might have linked him to Rome. We can conclude that Eusebius quoted him without any attempt at editorialization. Further, his silence on Peter's supposed presence in Rome suggests that Irenaeus embellished his own Papias reference. But why?

Irenaeus provides an interesting insight into the developing tradition of Peter having been in Rome. Not only did he apparently embroider Papias's works; his writing also sheds light on the *need* for establishing Peter's presence in Rome, which in turn sheds light on the need to editorialize other writings. At the time of Irenaeus there was already a debate, especially in Rome, on apostolic succession. Irenaeus was partial to those who saw Peter as the leader of the apostles after Jesus Christ's death and resurrection and, wishing to take advantage of Peter's perceived position, he concluded that Peter must have been in Rome.

It is important to remember that Irenaeus was writing as the second century came to an end. We have no earlier explicit statement from Rome itself of Peter's presence or his burial there. Justin Martyr, who wrote from Rome some 40 to 50 years before Irenaeus, had made no claim of Peter having been there. Irenaeus appears to be the first of the Catholic church fathers to provide an unequivocal statement to that effect.

Of course, it is unlikely that Irenaeus simply invented the story. In fact, just prior to the time of his writing, a tomb in Rome had suddenly been declared that of Peter. Irenaeus's references to Peter were potentially influenced by that declaration. Actually, it appears that two tombs were identified as Peter's by two different groups, which itself developed into a controversy in the Roman capital until Pope Damasus (366–384 C.E.) established a preference for one of them.

Theologian Oscar Cullmann, who provides the most recent definitive and objective study of the apostle's supposed martyrdom in Rome, states that "prior to the second half of the second century *no document* asserts explicitly the stay and martyrdom of Peter in Rome" (*Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, emphasis added). Only one document might be considered an exception: The *Apocalypse of Peter*, possibly written during the Bar Kochba revolt (132–135 C.E.). But it is so fragmentary in the Greek and so contradictory in the Ethiopic that its value is questionable. The Latin-language Muratorian Canon, written in the latter part of the second century, indicates that the *Apocalypse of Peter* was by no means universally accepted even then, noting that "some of us are not willing that [it] be read in church." In other words, despite providing support for Peter having been in Rome, the document appears to have been unacceptable even to those who could have used it to advantage. Still, in all its confusion the apocryphal work appears to have laid the ground for future claims on the subject.

Another apocryphal work, this one dating from some time *after* the middle of the second century, is the *Acts of Peter*, a Gnostic document that places Peter in Rome competing with the proto-Gnostic Simon Magus (see Acts 8) in performing miracles. The level of confusion in the details recorded in this work would define it as a short fictional work at best. The *Acts of Peter* was nonetheless circulated and alluded to by various Egyptian writers of the time. Indeed, it appears to have been the source of third-century church father Origen's account of Peter's death in Rome. But the fact that these details are recorded in writings from the eastern part of the empire, far from the imperial capital, raises a further question about their value in determining historical reality.

IN SEARCH OF A PEDIGREE

But why was it necessary to trace Peter to Rome in the first place?

Rome was the center of the empire and as such appeared to be the meeting place for various forms of Christianity that each claimed to carry the true message of Jesus Christ and that at the same time sought legitimacy within the empire. Peter Lampe describes the Christians in Rome during this period as suffering from “fractionation”: all of the groups claimed the name of Christ, but they operated at arm’s length from one another and without any sense of community (*From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*).

It is interesting to note the individuals and sects who gathered in Rome. Justin Martyr provides reliable details of Simon Magus being there (a point that is developed in the *Acts of Peter*). We also know that the noted heretic Marcion was in Rome and promulgated his ideas of the Scriptures from that city. Valentinus, whom we know today as one of the leaders of the groups classified as Gnostic, also established himself in Rome, as did another group known as the Carpocratians.

Roman Christianity was in fact predominantly composed of foreigners who had come to the city from other parts of the empire. And although all these groups clearly differed from one another in important respects, one feature was common to all of them: they all sought to identify themselves as separate from the church’s Jewish antecedents. Jesus Christ’s earliest followers had been seen by the Roman authorities as simply a sect of the Jews, like the Pharisees, the Sadducees or the Essenes. It was essential for those groups gravitating to Rome, who had no interest in association with any form of Judaism, to be recognized as a valid *new* religion. To do so they had to demonstrate the highest credentials. Paul had clearly been in Rome, but he was never a favorite until rehabilitated by Augustine in the 5th century. So finding a way to place that other great apostle, Peter, within the hierarchy of the Roman church would serve to establish the authority and the line of succession—and thus the credibility—that the church needed to assert itself over all the other Christian sects.

All of this occurred on the heels of another empire-shaking event. Jerusalem had been destroyed by Hadrian in 135 C.E. at the culmination of the Bar Kochba revolt. The church had existed in Jerusalem until that time, but with the demise of the city the believers became scattered. The [early church](/visionmedia/page.aspx%3Fid%3D2756) (/visionmedia/page.aspx%3Fid%3D2756) had lived in hope of the return of Jesus Christ to the Mount of Olives, and to Jerusalem in particular. As long as Jerusalem remained, it fed that hope.

In the fourth century, Eusebius provided a detailed list of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem until its fall, beginning with James the brother of Jesus, then Simeon the son of Cleophas, and then other relatives. Eusebius described a noteworthy first-century gathering for the purpose of selecting James's successor. The gravity and importance of this appointment was apparently not lost on them: "Those of the apostles and disciples of the Lord that were still living came together from all directions with those that were related to the Lord according to the flesh (for the majority of them also were still alive) to take counsel as to who was worthy to succeed James."

Though Eusebius's source may well have overstated some of the facts, his account of Simeon's appointment, together with the details of subsequent leaders, is most likely an exact record of the bishops in Jerusalem; providing such a list wouldn't have served the purpose of promoting Constantine and Roman Christianity, thus eliminating the likelihood of prejudice. Given his pro-Roman bias, Eusebius would undoubtedly have presented a list of the bishops of Rome as well, had there been such a list. So if Peter was indeed in Rome, it's curious that no comparable historical record exists to support *his* possible successors as leaders of the church in that city.

In fact, no reference to a bishop of Rome was made until the second century. Clement never claimed that role, even though the Corinthian church wrote to him about their difficulties. Ignatius of Antioch, writing to various churches as he traveled to Rome to be martyred, addressed no particular individual or leader in his epistle to the church at Rome, whereas in his other epistles to the churches in Asia Minor he mentioned the leaders by name. All the evidence suggests that no real office of a bishop had been established in Rome prior to that point.

ROME CLAIMS PRIMACY

The destruction of Jerusalem provided an opportunity for the church at Rome, located as it was at the heart of the empire, to lay claim to preeminence. The best scenario to support that claim was simply that Peter had been in Rome. This offered a clear alternative to the challenges from Gnostic and other leaders who were descending on the imperial capital.

Irenaeus's late-second-century writings about Peter plainly had this function in view. This becomes evident from a second reference in *Against All Heresies*: "Since ... it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the Churches, we do put to confusion all those who, in whatever manner, whether by an evil self-pleasing, by vainglory,

or by blindness and perverse opinion, assemble in unauthorized meetings; [we do this, I say,] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also [by pointing out] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops. *For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority*" (emphasis added).

What is interesting about Irenaeus's statement is that he does not claim Peter's primacy as the first pope, nor that any future bishop of Rome would be Peter's successor. The bishops of Rome, in Irenaeus's view, had originally been appointed by Peter and Paul to be overseers, not to fill their own role as apostles. His reference to two apostles to provide the foundation was also useful in countering the claims of Gnostic groups, who tended to center on one apostle or individual as the focal point of their revelation.

The claim of Peter living in Rome, however briefly, and being martyred there is thus a second-century creation designed to address the political needs of the Roman church. The legend came to be accepted as an unquestioned statement of faith by the time of Eusebius in the fourth century and by all church historians thereafter.

PHEME PERKINS, a Boston College professor and a Roman Catholic, made the following summary in her award-winning book, *Peter: Apostle for the Whole Church*: "Since we have no evidence of when Peter arrived in Rome or the circumstances that led to his execution, later claims that he was bishop in a Roman community must rest on traditions about the apostle which emerged in the second century. For the first century of its existence, there was probably not a single bishop in the Roman church." Perkins opines that Anicetus (ca. 154–165 C.E.) was probably the first bishop over the entire church at Rome, whereas others listed before him oversaw individual house churches—small groups meeting in people's homes.

So within the second-century evidence, there is no hint of what was to come in terms of the development of Peter's role within the church. That came later.

INTO ANOTHER CENTURY

What the historical record shows is the development of a tradition that didn't really begin to take shape until the third century; only then was the long-dead Peter identified as the first pope.

If the second century was a time of external challenges from Gnostic and other ideas, the third century started with internal challenges to the church at Rome. It is in this historical circumstance that we start to see the interpretation of a scripture that is now accepted as dogma and the very foundation of Catholic teaching. It is instructive to note that the dialogue between Jesus Christ and Peter recorded in Matthew 16:15–19 was not part of the developing legend about Peter until then.

Today attempts at interpreting this scripture are well documented by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, but seldom if ever is its first-century backdrop considered. The morphing of Peter from “apostle to the circumcision” to “first bishop of Rome” (and by automatic extension, pope) would have strained the comprehension of those in the [early church](#) ([/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx](#)).

The verses’ first-century context was clearly overlooked by Tertullian and Cyprian, two writers from North Africa whose third-century works provide the basis for argumentation and interpretation of Matthew 16:17–19 on which the enlarged role of the bishop of Rome is based.

Still, developing the idea that the bishop of Rome was Peter’s successor, and hence pope in the sense we understand it today, was a slow process. Although Tertullian and Cyprian wrote in the early part of the third century, we find the idea still not fully formed by the time of Augustine more than a century later.

A POPE IS BORN

So it appears that first-century history started to be rewritten in the second: Peter was posthumously determined to have been in Rome, established the church, and been martyred by Nero. The (competing) locations of his tomb were identified in the late second century, albeit in both cases without the benefit of evidence.

In the third century he was named not just the first bishop of Rome but the source of all power within the church, with successive bishops accumulating imperial power to themselves to control all aspects of the church. By the end of the third century, Peter was so entrenched in Rome that the ground had been laid for Pope Damasus to solidify the powers of the papacy and enshrine a doctrinal justification for Peter’s (and thus his own) position.

The rest, as they say, is history. Leo the Great (440–461) “was the first pope to claim to be Peter’s heir,” according to Catholic scholar Richard P. McBrien (*Lives of the Popes*). Eventually the emperor in the West disappeared and the bishop of Rome adorned himself in his clothes. A century later, McBrien notes, Gregory the Great (590–604) wielded secular power as great as his spiritual power.

It had taken hundreds of years to get there, but the legendary Peter was finally able to sit in his own exalted chair. (Of course, it wasn’t actually claimed to have been his chair until centuries after his death, but that’s another story!)