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## Was Peter Ever in Rome?

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Like many popes before him, Benedict XVI has sought to reaffirm the Roman Catholic Church's authority as compared with that of the Protestant churches, which he sees as lacking apostolic credentials. The pope bases his case on the long-held belief that the apostle Peter founded the church in Rome. Vision examines the historical evidence for this pivotal teaching.

**T**he primacy of Rome and the Roman Catholic Church, based on the [apostle Peter \(/node/965\)](#) founding the church in the city and later being martyred and buried there, has certainly been challenged since medieval times.

Back then, doubts may first have been expressed by the Waldensians, a sect out of conformity with the prevailing Roman orthodoxy. In their view, "the silence of the Bible was quite decisive," according to Oscar Cullmann in *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (1953, 1962).

During the following centuries others launched sporadic challenges against the teaching of Peter having been in Rome, but no one mounted a major assault until the early 19th century. Ferdinand C. Baur of Tübingen, applying a Hegelian model to his study of early

Christianity, suggested that the book of Acts outlined a progressive process whereby Petrine Christianity was challenged and replaced by Pauline Christianity, from which Roman Christianity developed. Hence Peter had been sidelined and there was no need for him to have been in Rome or to be seen as the leader of the church. Although Baur's peers rejected his approach, he nevertheless succeeded in striking a blow against the traditional view. And to the Vatican's great displeasure, others pursued the matter with some degree of vehemence throughout the 20th century.

Pope Benedict has brought the issue to public awareness again since taking office, but he is not the only person to have done so in the past few years. Embarrassingly, in the 1950s Roman Catholic archaeologists discovered a tomb in Jerusalem containing an ossuary—a bone box used in first-century Jewish burials—that bore the engraved name “Simon Bar Jona” (a name by which the apostle Peter is known in the Gospels). Not to be outdone, the Vatican soon produced its own archaeological evidence that Peter's tomb and remains were buried under the high altar in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. At the heart of its argument was a sarcophagus discovered in the first half of the century, which authorities began examining more closely in the years after the Second World War.

## **A GRAVE MATTER**

Unfortunately there is no way of proving whether either sarcophagus or ossuary contains the true remains of Peter. It may therefore be more fruitful to leave archaeology aside and focus on the historical literature that is available to everyone to consider.

This is the approach taken in one of the major contributions to the study of this question. Cullmann, in *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, gave the literary material his primary attention in seeking a conclusion to the matter. Scholars of recent date have reinforced that approach. Summarizing his presentation at a 2001 conference in Rome of the European Association for Biblical Studies, Jürgen Zangenberg noted: “Ever since the excavations under St Peter's Cathedral started in the 1940s and culminated in the official announcement of Pope Pius XII in 1953 that the true remains of St Peter had been found, many scholars have remained skeptical about the significance of the discoveries.” He went on to remark that “even the strongest proponents of the authenticity of the discovery cannot deny that little if anything about the earliest graves shows any clear Christian character. The first and second century CE graves very much resemble contemporaneous simple interments of common people from the

neighbouring quarters of Rome.” Further, Roman Christians showed no interest in the site until “around 160 CE,” when they constructed “a simple monument that consisted of a niche and a courtyard (the *Tropaion Gaii*).”

Zangenberg stressed, however, that this monument could not have been intended to mark the apostle’s grave, “since memory of ... Peter’s original burial place was lost by the time the *Tropaion* was erected. The existence of the *Tropaion* did not result in the development of a Christian burial site, but was integrated into a middle-class non-Christian burial street.” It wasn’t until Constantine’s time, he said, that “the site was firmly and finally taken over by Christians, thereby obliterating all earlier traces of burial activity apart from the immediate space around the *Tropaion*.”

In light of this, Cullmann seems justified in looking to literary evidence from the first few centuries for a basis on which to establish Peter’s presence and martyrdom in Rome. What, then, is the evidence to support the pope’s claim to authority for the Roman Catholic Church?

## **WRITTEN IN CODE?**

It is generally recognized that the New Testament is silent on Peter’s general whereabouts following his arrest and intended execution by King Agrippa in the early 40s C.E. (Acts 12). Peter briefly reappears in Jerusalem several years later (approximately 49 C.E.) for a conference of the apostles and other church leaders, as Luke records in Acts 15. Thereafter the New Testament record says nothing about Peter’s location except for one comment in his own epistles: in 1 Peter 5:13, he passes on salutations from church members in Babylon.

Those who want to see Peter clearly placed in Rome view his use of the term *Babylon* as a cipher for Rome. Others insist, however, that the epistle does not use coded language to cover the apostle’s whereabouts.

The late Carsten Thiede is one scholar who sought to prove that the code word was in use prior to 70 C.E. and thus before Peter’s epistle was written, and that Peter was attempting to veil his whereabouts. But Thiede himself pointed out that “for an inhabitant of [the Roman Empire \(/ancient-empires-kingdom-of-god-4371\)](#) it was perfectly possible, and indeed quite natural, to compare the ancient Babylonian Empire with that of Rome in terms of their respective size, splendour and power, and equally in a negative sense, in relation to their decadence and declining morals.” Thus, though *Babylon* may indeed have been used for

Rome before 70 C.E., the purpose was not to veil the capital of the empire but to elevate its position in the world by emphasizing its lineage. So Thiede's claim that Peter used the term *Babylon* to hide the fact that he was actually in Rome lacks credibility.

*Babylon* is a coded name for Rome in the subsequent writing of the Revelation to John, and it clearly becomes a feature of second-century writing. In addition, Jews used the term *Babylon* in a polemical way after 70 C.E. when the Romans brought about the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. Like the Babylonians before them, the Romans had destroyed the center of the Jewish religion. This usage came after the supposed date of Peter's martyrdom but would certainly fit with the usage of *Babylon* for Rome in the book of Revelation.

Margherita Guarducci, who wrote on the discovery of the grottos in the Vatican, suggests that the Jewish historian Josephus denies the presence of Jews in the Mesopotamian Babylon during the time when Peter wrote his epistle. Yet she fails to note that Josephus waxes eloquent on the funds for the Jerusalem temple that the Jews *in Babylon* sent. His reference to there being no Jews in Babylon is in the context of warfare in the area in the middle of the first century.

On the basis of the New Testament account, it would have been very possible for Peter to write his epistle from the city or province of Babylon itself. His ministry was to the Jews, and, as writings from subsequent centuries establish, Babylon was a center of Judaism both before and long after Peter.

Certainly that would be a more fitting solution to his whereabouts than the alternative—that Paul neglected to address Peter in his epistle to the church in Rome, and that Luke failed to note Peter's presence there when he and Paul arrived as a result of Paul's appeal to Caesar (Acts 28), ostensibly around 60 C.E. The internal evidence of the epistle to the Romans, written around 57 C.E., establishes that Paul had no knowledge of any apostle, least of all Peter, having preceded him to Rome. As the Waldensians noted, the New Testament's silence on the subject is deafening.

So if the New Testament does not establish the case of Peter being in Rome, what other evidence exists?

## ON CLEMENT AND CONTENT

Because the case cannot be established from the New Testament, Catholic writers in particular normally base their argument on a nonbiblical text known as the First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians. This letter is “likely” (according to Notre Dame theology professor Richard P. McBrien, author of *Lives of the Popes*) the work of the Clement known in the Vatican’s official list of pontiffs as Clement I. According to some Catholic church fathers, he is also the Clement whom Paul mentions in his letter to the church in Philippi (Philippians 4:3), though again, there is no way to verify this.

Clement’s epistle is normally dated just before the end of the first century, and in it he makes a statement about Peter and Paul:

“To pass from the examples of ancient days, let us ... set before us the noble examples which belong to our generation. By reason of jealousy and envy the greatest and most righteous pillars of the Church were persecuted, and contended even unto death. Let us set before our eyes the good Apostles. There was Peter who by reason of unrighteous jealousy endured not one nor two but many labours, and thus having borne his testimony went to his appointed place of glory. By reason of jealousy and strife Paul by his example pointed out the prize of patient endurance. After that he had been seven times in bonds, had been driven into exile, had been stoned, had preached in the East and in the West, he won the noble renown which was the reward of his faith, having taught righteousness unto the whole world and having reached the farthest bounds of the West; and when he had borne his testimony before the rulers, so he departed from the world and went unto the holy place, having been found a notable pattern of patient endurance.”

From this small section it is deduced that both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome. But Clement’s statement is taken out of context. In an article published in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* in 2004, Michael D. Goulder, professor emeritus of biblical studies at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, examined the context of Clement’s account. Applying literary analysis to the text, Goulder established that the statement about Peter and Paul had to be read in terms of the preceding and succeeding sections. Prior to the passage quoted above, Clement had given seven Old Testament examples of people who had suffered because of jealousy. (Only one, Cain’s brother Abel, had actually died because of the jealousy.) Goulder then proceeded to show that each Old Testament example had a New Testament parallel in that each individual or group had suffered in a similar way because of jealousy. Among these later examples, Clement listed first “the greatest and most righteous

pillars” of the church; they, like Abel, had “contended even unto death.” This description would certainly fit the apostle James. Peter, Clement said, had fled (just as Jacob had fled his jealous brother, Esau); and Paul (like Joseph in the Old Testament) had been put in bondage.

In other words, as Goulder read the epistle, Clement didn’t even address the issue of whether or not Peter or Paul were martyred. The letter simply identified them as having suffered from the jealousy of others. Clement’s purpose in giving these examples was merely to correct the Corinthians with regard to the internal problems that he saw arising from the jealousy and envy that had developed among them (1 Clement 3). Goulder considers that based on this clarification, Peter may have died in his bed in Jerusalem for all Clement tells us.

Paul’s death creates a conundrum for those who hold that Clement’s epistle speaks of jealousy leading to the apostle’s martyrdom, in that they also tend to accept traditions of the second and third century, which hold that the apostle died at the order of Nero following the burning of Rome. On the basis of these later traditions, Paul’s death is linked to political expediency rather than jealousy. The two views (neither of which can be substantiated) would appear to be incompatible.

As for Peter, we know nothing of his death from any first-century source other than the last chapter of the fourth Gospel. He is described in John 21:18 only as being led where he would not want to go. The unverified tradition of him being crucified upside down dates from the end of the second century, almost 150 years after his death.

Central to the idea of Peter and Paul’s martyrdom is Clement’s use of a term translated in English as “witness” or “testimony.” The word is read by many to mean “martyrdom.” But its use to convey that meaning appears to be absent from any other first-century source. The term is used frequently throughout the New Testament, however, to convey the idea of a testimony or a witness. It wasn’t until after Clement’s time, in the later second century, that it came to mean “martyrdom.” In light of the literary structure of Clement’s epistle, it would be safer to read the term as meaning “a spoken witness” or “a testimony.”

Why, then, should we find so much being read into this section of Clement?

From the subsequent century we read accounts of the leaders of other sects or heresies being in Rome. Justin Martyr, a citizen of Rome, reported that the heretic Simon Magus came to his city; yet he was totally silent on Peter’s alleged presence there. Marcion, another heretic, is said to have spent time in Rome. Add to this Valentinus, a leading teacher of a sect that today is classified as Gnostic. It would appear that a presence in Rome became an aspect of

identity or authenticity of a religious group. In that the budding *orthodox* Christian movement saw Peter as the leader of the apostles after Jesus' death, he had somehow to be introduced into the Rome scene as a means of validating or lending authority to the religion.

## **IN SEARCH OF EVIDENCE**

Clement's references to the apostles have been subjected to other literary analyses. Recent studies on the value of eyewitness memory or recollection in oral societies have revitalized the idea that the Gospels may indeed be eyewitness accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. (See, for example, Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* [2006].)

Markus Bockmuehl, professor of biblical and early Christian studies at Oxford, has now applied that approach to the writings of Clement. To him, the mere mention of Peter and Paul by name indicates that both men were known personally by Clement and the church in Rome, and that this constitutes evidence that Peter was in Rome. To his credit, Bockmuehl exercises caution in approaching this matter.

One has to ask two questions, however. As Clement's epistle was written to Corinth, in Greece, is it the recollection of those in the church at Corinth or at Rome into which Clement taps? Bockmuehl assumes the latter as it supports his idea that Peter was in Rome. Second, to follow Bockmuehl's line of argument, does the mention of a personal name indicate that the people had actually met the individual, or that they simply knew of him or her?

Take, for instance, Paul's epistle to the Corinthians. He addresses Peter (or Cephas, as Paul calls him). Does this mean that the church in Corinth had met Peter or that they had firsthand dealings with him? Possibly; we don't know for certain. But what of James, sometimes referred to as "the Lord's brother"? He is also mentioned by name, yet a person was likely to have met James only by visiting Jerusalem. In other words, knowledge of those individuals who were involved in the task of spreading the gospel was well established throughout the churches, wherever they were located, simply by word of mouth. In some cases church members may have visited Jerusalem for festivals or to accompany Paul, and they may have met church leaders personally, but for the majority of the church, knowledge could only have been by word of mouth.

So Bockmuehl's suggestion that Peter's physical location can be established on the basis that Clement's audience had personal memory of the apostle requires much more study before it can be warranted as evidence.

As the discussion has developed, the opinions expressed have depended on the confessional stance of the writer. Catholic scholars see the evidence from a Catholic viewpoint, while Protestants adopt a level of skepticism regarding the claims. Then, of course, scholars may have no confessional stance to defend and approach the material from the viewpoint of historical-critical study.

What, then, can be said of the evidence for Peter being in Rome? Zangenberg suggested at the aforementioned conference that it was a second-century idea that gained popularity after the time of Constantine. The late professor John C. O'Neill of Edinburgh, addressing the same conference, laid out the way in which Pope Damasus I (366–384) harnessed stories of Peter and Paul in Rome. The pope's purpose, explained O'Neill, was to elevate Rome's primacy over the other bishoprics in the East: the politics of the church dictated that Peter not only had to have been to Rome but had to be thought to have died there.

History suggests that knowledge of the apostles' burial places died with their first-century contemporaries. The apostles' examples were appreciated and honored, but these men were not put on pedestals to be revered, as in later generations. Writings from the second century portray a very different set of beliefs and practices among those who claimed to follow Jesus Christ than is portrayed in first-century writings.

Was Peter ever in Rome? It's a tough question for the Roman Catholic Church, whose claim to apostolic authority, it turns out, stands on no real evidence at all. The deficiency of which the pope accuses the Protestant churches holds true for the Catholic Church as well. Like the suit of fancy clothes that a fabled emperor once bought, the evidence just doesn't exist.