

Gospel According to Matthew

Bible Study: Peter's Prologue

When I had originally asked for suggestions or paths that this Bible Study might follow, one intriguing idea was a look at Peter. Not the canonical books of First and Second Peter, but a discussion of the man himself.

This seemed like a good idea, at least as a start to examining Matthew's Gospel account. Peter appears frequently in the gospels, thus this prologue so as to set the stage for when Peter appears.

What do we know about Peter, the man?

There are many traditions and stories that have arisen over time dealing with Peter, but I'm a tad skeptical of "traditional stories" and usually perceive them like the tales of Paul Bunyan (and Babe) or John Henry (the railroad steel-driving man). Most likely a real person serving as the basis for elaborate and extravagant tales that developed over the years.

Our primary source must be the canonical scriptures, specifically the Gospel authors as well as Luke's recording of the Acts of the Apostles. There are also references to Peter in some of Paul's epistles. And yet, even these can't be seen as scrupulous biographies, but rather our understanding of the man through his words and actions as recorded by the authors. Nevertheless, these are the sources I trust the most.

I'll stick to the scriptures. What do we know of the man?



He was a fisherman, who along with his brother Andrew worked the Sea of Galilee. They apparently had a partnership with James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Just as an aside, although it's not specifically mentioned in the Bible, they most likely fished for either the Kinneret Sardine which was pickled as a means of preservation or the Tilapia Galilea (the side of fries didn't originally come with the usual catch).

The legendary name of Tilapia Galilea is the St. Peter Fish—but that's another story I'll leave to the fabulists.

Before I wander to far afield from scriptures into the territory of legend, we also know that Peter was married (or possibly widowed), only because Peter had a mother-in-law living in Capernaum. Neither the name of Peter's wife nor mother-in-law are mentioned in the scriptures, but clearly there is only one way to obtain a mother-in-law: marriage.

We also know that Peter was part of what could be called Jesus' "Inner Circle". Whenever something dramatic was to happen, such as the raising of Jarius' daughter (Mt. 9:18-26), the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-8), and the Agony



In the Garden (Mt. 26:37), it was always Peter, James, and John who would be present—and Peter is always mentioned first.

Luke relates that after the Ascension of Jesus, Peter takes the lead of the Apostles by designating a successor to Judas (Acts 1:15-22). He also opened the church to the gentiles by baptizing Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:1-11, 18) and his authority is not challenged by the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:7-11).

Although he was clearly a principle figure in Christ's ministry in the region of Palestine, he did travel outside the region after the Easter event. Paul mentions a visit to Antioch (Galatians 2:11-21) He even possibly visited Corinth as Paul mentions a group of people in Corinth as a party of Cephas (1 Corinthians 1:12). Cephas (Κηφας) is the Greek transliteration of an Aramaic word for rock. The Latin version is Petra, meaning rock.

Biblical scholars, based on verses in the canonical book of First Peter, believe that he was in Rome and the early Church Fathers accepted the fact that he was crucified in Rome during the Neroian persecutions (circa 64-67 CE).

The epistles of First Peter and Second Peter, found in the Christian scriptures are attributed to Peter and are considered canonical. Biblical scholars, however, allow for the fact the St. Peter didn't necessarily set down at a desk somewhere in Rome, pen in hand, and literally write the texts.

This is based in part that Peter, as a fisherman, was most likely illiterate as far as reading and writing goes. These skills were not common-place abilities of most people. He may have known some Koiné Greek, the language of the common-folk of the Roman realm, but even the fact that the style of writing was a tad unsophisticated, it is believed that he had a scribe (possibly Silvanus—the one who delivered the first epistle to Asia Minor—1 Peter 5:12) that could have possibly taken dictation.

It is also possible that after Peter's death, a companion of Peter (Silvanus?), wrote down things he remembered Peter as saying. We need to remember that early on it was not uncommon to write in the "voice" of a prophet—or other celebrity—keeping alive his teachings.

Turning the page, there are also other writings (non-canonical) attributed to Peter.



As for other documents attributed to Peter (GOSPEL OF PETER, ACTS OF PETER, APOCALYPSE OF PETER) the early Church Fathers disallowed them for being Docetic or Gnostic writings falsely attributed to him. Docetism (denies the humanity of Jesus) and Gnosticism (accepts that this world is evil and only the Spirit is good) were first century heresies of the Church.

It appears that the early Church—or Apostolic—Fathers (the first three, Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp, who may have known the Apostles) had access to more complete documents than the existing fragments that we have of the GOSPEL OF PETER and the APOCALYPSE OF PETER that were found in Akhmim, Egypt (approx. 310 miles south of Cairo on the Nile River) in

1886-1887 with a slightly longer version of the APOCALYPSE OF PETER in Ethiopia in 1910.

THE GOSPEL OF PETER (let's call it Akhmim Fragment I) is a fragment of an assumed larger document

because the text begins and ends mid-sentences. It is primarily a passion narrative, more detailed than the canonical Gospel accounts. It strikes me as attempting to answer questions that the early church had or to fill in the gaps in detail that the Gospel authors omitted.

If we are honest, we've all had a desire to know more of what actually happened at the Easter event, such as "How big was the rock?" "How was it rolled into and out of place?" "What was the angel like in the tomb?" this fragment answers these sort of questions.

The APOCALYPSE OF PETER (let's call it Akhmim Fragment II) is also a fragment of an assumed larger document. It, too, begins and ends abruptly. It is framed as a discourse of the Risen Christ to his faithful, offering a vision first of heaven, and then of hell, granted to Peter.

I would almost bet that if we had the full book and not just a fragment, it would run circles around the BOOK OF REVELATION in the canonical scriptures. This is too good not to share an even smaller fragment of the APOCALYPSE OF PETER:

here was all equal, and with one voice they praised the Lord God, rejoicing in that

And the dwellers in that place were clad with the raiment of shining angels, and their raiment was like unto their land. And angels ran round about them there.

And the glory of them that dwelt tplace. The Lord saith unto us: This is the place of your leaders (or, high priests), the righteous men.

And I saw also another place over against that one, very squalid; and it was a place of punishment, and they that were punished and the angels that punished them had their raiment dark, according to the air of the place. And some there were there hanging by their tongues; and these were they that blasphemed the way of righteousness, and under them was laid fire flaming and tormenting them.

That's about all I have on St. Peter for now, but I think Frederick Buechner, in his 'tongue in cheek' style of writing best describes him. I offer to you the following writing of his as the end to this Prologue:

Extensive Quote from
PECULIAR TREASURES: A BIBLICAL WHO'S WHO
Frederick Buechner

Peter

Everybody knows he started out as a fisherman. He lived with his wife in Capernaum, where they shared a house with his mother-in-law and his brother Andrew. He and Andrew had their own boat and were in business with a couple of partners named James and John, Zebedee's sons. The first time Jesus laid eyes on him, he took one good look and said, "So you're Simon, the son of John" (John 1:42) and then said that from then on he'd call him Cephas, which is Aramaic for Peter, which is Greek for rock.

A rock isn't the prettiest thing in creation or the fanciest or the smartest, and if it gets rolling in the wrong direction, watch out, but there's no nonsense about a rock, and once it settles down, it's pretty much there to stay. There's not a lot you can do to change a rock or crack it or get under its skin, and, barring earthquakes, you can depend on it about as much as you can depend on anything. So Jesus called him the Rock, and it stuck with him the rest of his life. Peter the Rock. He could stop fishing for fish, Jesus told him. He'd been promoted. From there on out people were to be his business. Now he could start fishing for them.

There was a lot of talk going around about who Jesus was and who he wasn't, and Jesus himself seemed just as glad to steer clear of the subject. Then one day he brought it up himself, and the disciples batted it around for a while. There were some people who said he was John the Baptist come back from the grave, they told him, or maybe Elijah, or Jeremiah, or some other prophet who thought he'd see what he could do a second time around. There were all kinds of half-baked theories, they said. Then Jesus put it to them straight: "Who do YOU say that I am?" Nobody wanted to stick his neck out, and the silence was deafening till Peter broke it or till it washed up against the rock that Peter was and broke itself. "You're the Christ," he said, "the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:15-16).

It took a lot of guts to say, and Jesus knew it did. If it was true, it was enough to blow the lid off everything. If it wasn't true, you could get yourself stoned to death as a blasphemer for just thinking it. But Peter said it anyway, and Jesus made up for him the only beatitude he ever made up for a single individual and said, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona," which means Simon, son of John, and seems to have been what he always called him when he really meant business. Then he went back to Peter the Rock again and told him that he was the rock he wanted to build his church on and that as soon as he got to Heaven, he was to be the one to decide who else got in. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom," Jesus said (Matthew 16:17-19). It was another promotion.

But if Peter was the only one Jesus ever gave a beatitude of his own to, he was also the only one he ever gave Hell to, at least in quite such a direct way. It happened not long afterwards. Jesus was saying that to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, wasn't going to be a bed of roses all the way, and the time wasn't far off when he'd suffer the tortures of the damned in Jerusalem and be killed. Peter couldn't take it. "God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen," he said, and that's when Jesus lit into him. "Get behind me, Satan," he said because the rock that Peter was at that point was blocking the grim road that Jesus knew he had to take whether he or Peter or anybody else wanted it that way or not because God wanted it that way, and that was that. "You're not on God's side but men's," he said. "You're a rock I've cracked my shin on (Matthew 16:21-23)."

It wasn't the last time Peter said the wrong thing either, or asked the wrong question, or got the wrong point, or at least failed to do the thing that was right. The day he saw Jesus walking on the water and tried to walk out to him himself, for instance, he was just about to go under for the third time because rocks have never been much good at floating when Jesus came to the rescue (Matthew 14:28-31). Once when Jesus was talking about forgiveness, Peter asked how many times you were supposed to forgive any one person - seven times maybe? - and Jesus turned on him and said that after you'd forgiven him seventy times seven you were just starting to get warmed up (Matthew 18:21-22). Another time Jesus was talking about Heaven, and Peter wanted to know what sort of special deal people like himself got, people who'd left home and given everything up the way he'd given everything up to follow Jesus; and Jesus took it easy on him that time because a rock can't help being

a little thick sometimes and said he'd get plenty, and so would everybody else (Matthew 19:27-30).

And then there were the things he did or failed to do, those final, miserable days just before the end. At their last supper, when Jesus started to wash the disciples' feet, it was Peter who protested—"You wash my feet!" - and when Jesus explained that it showed how they were all part of each other and servants together, Peter said, "Lord, not my feet only but my hands and head!" and would probably have stripped down to the altogether if Jesus hadn't stopped him in time (John 13:5-11). At that same sad meal, Jesus said he would have to be going soon, and because Peter didn't get what he meant or couldn't face it, he asked about it, and Jesus explained what he meant was that he was going where nobody on earth could follow him. Peter finally got the point then and asked *why* he couldn't follow. "I'll lay down my life for you," he said, and then Jesus said to him the hardest thing Peter had ever heard him say. "Listen, listen," he said, "the cock won't crow till you've betrayed me three times" (John 13:36-38), and that's the way it was, of course—Peter sitting out there in the high priest's courtyard keeping warm by the fire while, inside, the ghastly interrogation was in process, and then the girl coming up to ask him three times if he wasn't one them and his replying each time that he didn't know what in God's name she was talking about. And then the old cock's wattles trembling scarlet as up over the horizon it squawked the rising sun, and the tears running down Peter's face like rain down a rock (Matthew 26:69-75).



Don't forget, your questions will always be the start of the next session. Keep those comments and questions coming in!

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According to Paul, the first person Jesus came back to see after Easter morning was Peter. What he said and what Peter said nobody will ever know, and maybe that's just as well. Their last conversation on this earth, however, is reported in the Gospel of John.

It was on the beach, at daybreak. Some of the other disciples were there and Jesus cooked them breakfast. When it was over, he said to Peter (only again he called him Simon, son of John, because if ever he meant business, this was it), "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" and Peter said he did. Then Jesus asked the same question a second time and then once again, and each time Peter said he loved him—three times in all, to make up for the other three times.

Then Jesus said, "Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep," and you get the feeling that this time Peter didn't miss the point (John 21:9-19). From fisher of fish to fisher of people to keeper of the keys to shepherd. It was the Rock's final promotion, and from that day forward he never let the head office down again. [PECULIAR TREASURES, 1979, F., pp 133-136]

End Prologue