

QUO VADIS LEGEND OF PETER IN ROME FROM APOCRYPHAL “ACTS OF PETER”

By David Lee Burris



**None Of This Actually Happened – It Is A Fable
In Support Of A Peter First Rome Pope Fraud**

“The last historical scriptural reference to Peter has him at the Council of Jerusalem advocating Paul’s mission to the Gentiles (Acts 15). [Among] the wealth of legend and mythology, most of it **appearing 150 years after the apostles died [is the] best known Acts of Peter, a third century work** that records that, when the Neronian persecution began begins, Peter leaves the city (Rome) rather than face crucifixion with other Christians in the Hippodrome.

As he flees south along the Appian Way, he encounters Jesus walking toward the city. ‘*Quo Vadis, Domine?*’ he asks. ‘Where are you going, Lord?’ Jesus in what became known as the *Quo Vadis Legend* replies, ‘To Rome, to be crucified again.’ The Apostle Peter, once again humiliated, thinks further, turns, and goes back to the city where, at his own request, he is crucified upside down, feeling himself unworthy of being crucified in the same way as his master. That Peter reached Rome and was martyred there is now accepted by historians, though **nothing about his activities in the capital was recorded at the time.**”

- *The Veil Is Torn, Volume One, The Christians Series*

- **This tradition that the Apostle Peter held the papal office from A.D. 42 to A.D. 67 started early in the third century.**
- **26 church congregants are noted by their names in the first fifteen verses of Paul's Letter to the Romans in chapter 16. Peter is not even casually mentioned although this point of time overlaps with that of his supposed service term there.**
- **Acts 12 – Peter was held this period in prison in Jerusalem.**

“But it is said on all sides, Was not Saint Peter at Rome? Was he not crucified with his head down? Are not the pulpits in which he taught, the altars at which he said the mass, in this eternal city?

St. Peter having been in Rome, my venerable brethren, rest only on tradition...

Scaliger, one of the most learned of men, has not hesitated to say St. Peter’s episcopate & residence at Rome ought to be classed with ridiculous legends.”

1870 Vatican Council; Bishop Strossmayer

The Apostle Peter in Rome

What traditions connect Apostle Peter to Rome?

The earliest testimony to the apostle Peter's presence in [Rome](#) is a letter from a Christian deacon named Gaius. Writing probably toward the end of the second century C.E.—so, around 170 or 180 C.E.—Gaius tells about the wondrous things in Rome, including something called a *tropaion* (see below for more) where Peter established a church—in fact, *the Church*, the Roman Catholic church at the site where St. Peter's Basilica is today. But there are other traditions besides Peter's *tropaion*. One early Christian text, the *Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, recounts many things that Peter did in the city. At one point in *Acts of Peter*, Peter is taunted by a flamboyant heretic, Simon Magus. Simon challenges Peter to a flying contest around the Roman Forum, but Peter's prayers make Simon crash to the ground, proving that Simon's powers are not as great as his own. At the end of this text, Peter, not wishing to be martyred for his faith, flees from Roman authorities taking the Via Appia leading out of the city. Unexpectedly, Peter meets [Jesus](#), who is traveling in the opposite direction. He asks Jesus, "Where are you going?" Jesus tells Peter that he is going to Rome "to be crucified again." Peter realizes, from this, that he cannot flee from his fate.

"Where are you going?" in Latin is "*Quo Vadis?*" and there's a medieval church in Rome called the Church of Quo Vadis at the spot where Peter met Jesus.

To prove that his vision was real, you can still see there a bit of marble pavement which the faithful say miraculously preserve Jesus' footprints.

Is it likely that the apostle Peter went to Rome and founded the church there?

Interestingly, the Bible says nothing about Peter ever traveling to Rome. When the gospels end, Peter is in Jerusalem. It's the same in the Book of Acts. [The apostle Paul](#), in his letters, also talks about meeting Peter in the eastern Mediterranean. After Jesus' death, Paul says that [Jesus' brother, James](#), and Peter are the co-leaders of the "church," or assembly, of the Jesus-followers in Jerusalem. **In short, there is no early textual evidence for Peter in Rome, so for some people, it's very hard to believe that he ever traveled there. Not only is it a very long way, according to the New Testament, Peter was a fisherman who was not very educated and who spoke only Aramaic; he was not the type of person that might travel widely across the Roman Empire to a large city where Latin and Greek were the dominant languages. The absence of connection between Peter and Rome in the New Testament, the lack of references to him in our most earliest Roman Christian literature, and what we know of Peter's background and character all combine to make it unlikely, to my mind, that he ever went to Rome.**

Is there any evidence that Peter died in Rome?



St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, the traditional burial site of the apostle Peter.

There is no solid evidence — textual or even archaeological — that the Apostle Peter died in Rome. Starting around the end of the second century, Christian pilgrims went to see Peter's *tropaion*. But a *tropaion* is not a tomb. The word itself is very unusual; sometimes translated as “trophy,” it means something like a war memorial or a cenotaph (an empty grave). It's not the word used in the Roman Empire for a burial place. Yet this spot — which was originally in the middle of an ancient cemetery — was quickly understood as the place where Peter was buried. **When it was excavated in the 1950s, archaeologists were shocked to find that there was no grave and no bones under the *tropaion*.**

Why are there two places in Rome where the apostle Peter was supposedly buried?

This is another fascinating thing we explore in *Finding Jesus*. Most people know about Peter's traditional burial site at St. Peter's. But it turns out that there's a second site in Rome where pilgrims went for hundreds of years, which was known as the *Memoria Apostolorum* (the Memorial to the Apostles). It's off the Via Appia at the modern site of the Catacombs of San Sebastiano, and you can still go and visit it today, although the memorial itself is largely built over. What's amazing is that the site preserves around 600 graffiti scrawled by [Christian pilgrims](#) in the early Middle Ages, most of them prayers to Peter and Paul, the joint patron saints of Rome. It certainly looks like people believed that Peter was buried there, but excavators found no evidence of a tomb there, either!

As far as I can tell, this leaves us with two options: Either Peter's body was at both these sites at one point and moved from one to the other, or Peter's body was never at either site, but people still associated him with the site.

~ BAR – The *Biblical Archaeology Review*

Was Peter the First Pope?



MOISES PINEDO

DOCTRINAL MATTERS

Many advocates of petrine tradition will argue that Peter was appointed the “first pope.” Consider some of the arguments that are presented in favor of this assertion.

Argument #1: Peter received the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:19).

With this statement Catholicism argues that Peter was granted supreme power or authority over the church. Although the context in Matthew supports no such interpretation, people of various religions agree that Peter was granted “something special” that was given to no other apostle. This “something” has often been misinterpreted.

We need to understand what “kingdom of heaven” means. Some people have suggested that it refers to heaven itself, and thus, they have represented Peter as the one who allows or prevents access into the eternal reward. But this interpretation is inconceivable since it finds itself in clear opposition to the context of this passage. Reading Matthew 16:18, we understand that the subject under discussion is not heaven itself, but the church. Therefore, Jesus spoke of the church as being the kingdom of heaven. This is shown not only in the context of Matthew 16:18, but it also is taught in many other passages throughout the New Testament (e.g., Mark 9:1; Colossians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; Hebrews 12:28).

Further, we need to understand the nature of the “keys” given to Peter. H. Leo Boles wrote, “To use the keys was to open the door or give the terms of entrance into the kingdom of God” (1952, p. 348). In other words, because of Peter’s confession about Jesus (Matthew 16:16), Jesus gave him the privilege of being the first man to tell lost souls how to become Christians and thus become part of the Lord’s church. Barnes put it this way:

When the Savior says, therefore, he will give to Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven, he means that he will make him *the instrument of opening the door of faith to the world*—the first to preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles (2005a, p. 171, italics in orig.).

There is no doubt that the “keys” represent the opportunities Peter would have to welcome the world, for the very first time, to the Christian age and to the kingdom of heaven—the church.

Also, we need to know **when** Peter used the “keys.” Jesus’ declaration was in a prophetic form. Peter would have the opportunity to open the doors of the church in the future. The Bible clearly shows us the fulfillment of this prophecy in Acts 2. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit like the other apostles (2:4), stood and gave the first recorded Gospel sermon after the resurrection of Jesus (2:14-38). It was at that moment when Jesus’ words were fulfilled. Because of the preaching of Peter and the other apostles, 3,000 Jews (cf. 2:5) were baptized into Christ and entered through the open doors of the church (2:41-47). However, the church would be composed not only of Jews, but also Gentiles. Acts 10 tells us that Peter opened the doors of the church to the Gentiles, in the same way he opened the doors of the church to the Jews. This was the “special something” given to Peter because of his confession—the privilege of being the first to preach the Gospel (after the resurrection of Christ) to both the Jews and the Gentiles.

Peter opened the doors of the church, and since then the doors of the church have remained open. Only Peter received this privilege. Jesus said, “I will give **you** [Peter] the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:19, emp. added). There are no individuals, such as popes, opening and closing the doors of the church.

Argument #2: Peter received the power of binding and loosing (Matthew 16:19).

With this argument Catholicism affirms two things concerning Peter: (1) that he received the authority to forgive sins; and (2) that Jesus considered anything Peter would do with His church as approved, authoritative, and good. In other words, Jesus gave him the gift of “infallibility.”

In order to analyze what Jesus said about Peter, we must take into account that the context of Matthew 16:19 is linked to the subject of the church, and not to the forgiveness of sins or the concession of some kind of infallibility about doctrinal matters. A biblical text that can help us understand Matthew 16:19 is Matthew 18:18, where Jesus made the same promise to **all** His apostles. He said, “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Of this text, Boles has noted, “**This is the same thought as in Matt. 16:19.** This shows that it has a broader application than that of the discipline of an erring brother. **The Holy Spirit would guide the apostles in their instruction to the erring brother and the church**” (1952, p. 377, emp. added). In His declaration in Matthew 16:19, Jesus affirmed that the conditions of the Christian system that Peter and the other apostles would expound already had been required by Heaven.

The Greek grammar of these verses sheds more light on the meaning of Jesus’ statement. A.T. Robertson noted that “[t]he passive perfect future occurs in the N.T. only in the periphrastic form in such examples as Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 18:18” (1934, p. 361). Therefore, the text should read, “whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.” By saying this, Jesus declared that resolutions made on Earth were subject to decisions made in heaven. The apostles would preach in accordance with what was already bound or loosed in heaven. This was based not on the infallibility of a man, but on the infallibility of the Holy Spirit promised to the apostles in the first century (John 16:13; cf. Matthew 10:19-20). Today we have the inspired, infallible teachings of the Holy Spirit recorded for us in the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Jesus **never** established Peter as a pope. The titles “Pope,” “Universal Bishop,” “Earthly Head of the Church,” “Pontiff,” and others never came from the mouth of Jesus to describe Peter. Regardless of the privileges given to Peter, his authority and rights were the same authority and rights given to the other apostles of the Lord (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:1-5; 12:28; 2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11; Galatians 2:8).

WHO WAS PETER?

If Peter was not the first pope, then the question becomes, “Who was Peter?” Was he equal to the other apostles, or did he deserve a position of supremacy among the others? The arguments that establish Peter’s identity may be presented as follows.

Argument #1: Peter was only a man.

Although this declaration is obvious to many, sometimes its implications are overlooked. When Cornelius lay prostrate before Peter (cf. Acts 10:25), he told him, “Stand up; I too am just a man” (Acts 10:26, NASB). With this statement Peter implied three very important points: (a) that he was “**too**...a man”—that is to say, a man just like Cornelius; (b) that he was “**a** man”—that is to say, just like all men; and (c) that he was “**just** a man”—that is to say that he was not God, and ultimately was unworthy of worship. Peter, with all humility, understood that his human nature prevented him from accepting worship. On the other hand, the pope, being just a man like Peter, expects men to bow before him, kiss his feet, and revere him, thus receiving worship that does not belong to him. What a difference between Peter and his alleged successors! Not even God’s angels allow men to show adoration by kneeling before them (Revelation 19:10; 22:8-9). One can only be astonished at the tremendous audacity of one who usurps the place that belongs only to God!

Argument #2: Peter was an apostle with the same authority and rights as the other apostles.

On one occasion, the apostles of the Lord were arguing about who was the greatest among them (Luke 22:24), so Jesus told them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them.... **But not so among you**” (Luke 22:25-26, emp. added; cf. Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48). Jesus never would have made this comment if Peter had more authority and rights than the other apostles as Catholicism suggests. In fact, if Peter was to be considered more honorable than the other apostles, this would have been the opportune time to clarify this point to the rest of the apostles who were “hungry for another’s glory.” However, Jesus assured them that this would not be the case among His apostles.

On another occasion, the mother of John and James came before Jesus with them, asking Him to allow her two sons to sit by Him in His kingdom, one on the right and the other on the left (Matthew 20:20-21). Jesus pointed out that they did not know what they were asking (Matthew 20:22), and added, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.... **Yet it shall not be so among you**” (Matthew 20:25-26, emp. added). If Jesus considered Peter as greater than the other disciples, He could have clarified the issue immediately by telling Zebedee’s wife and sons that they were asking for an honor already given to Peter. But, He did not do that. Today it seems that many religious people want to make it so, and exalt Peter above the other apostles, in spite of what Jesus said.

Many Catholics try to justify their claim that Peter was first pope by affirming that he was the greatest of the apostles. They declare that Peter was greater because: (1) he always is mentioned first in the lists of the apostles (e.g., Matthew 10:2; Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13); (2) he was the apostle who recognized Jesus as Lord in Matthew 16:16; and (3) Jesus told him to care for His sheep (John 21:15-19). Are these arguments sufficient for establishing the papacy or supremacy for Peter? No. Consider the case for any other apostle. For example, it could be said that John was the “greatest” of the apostles because: (1) in the Bible he is referred to as the “disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 21:20,24); (2) he rested on Jesus’ bosom just before His arrest (John 13:25; 21:20)—certainly a posture that suggests a close relationship; and (3) Jesus charged him with the responsibility of caring for His mother (John 19:26-27). Does this mean that we also should consider John as a pope? If not, should we consider Peter as a pope when **all** of the apostles had the **same** authority and their own privileges? Indeed, Jesus gave all of His disciples, not just Peter, authority (Matthew 28:19-20).

Finally, consider the words of Paul. He said: “[F]or in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing” (2 Corinthians 12:11). From this verse, we conclude that Paul was inferior to none of the apostles, and that Peter was neither lesser nor greater than Paul.

Argument #3: Peter was an apostle who had the same power as the other apostles.

Some religious people have spread the myth that Peter possessed more miraculous power than the other apostles, and that, therefore, he was greater than the rest. Yet, Matthew 17:14-21 presents the account of an epileptic boy who was brought to the disciples of Jesus (including Peter), but **they could not** heal him. If Peter had a power that was “more effective” than the other apostles’ power, he should have been able to perform this miracle. However, the boy was healed only after he was taken to Jesus. Jesus then reprimanded **all** the apostles for their lack of faith.

Near the end of His ministry, Jesus promised **all** of His disciples that “he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do” (John 14:12). In Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit came with power, He empowered not only Peter, but also the rest of the apostles (vss. 1-4). This is confirmed when we read that “fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done **through the apostles**” (Acts 2:43, emp. added). There is no doubt that the apostle Peter was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, but that power also was manifested in the rest of the apostles and was **never** grounds for considering one apostle as being superior to another.

Argument #4: Peter was a man who made mistakes.

Peter committed many mistakes just as any other person. The New Testament records that he: (a) doubted Jesus (Matthew 14:28-31); (b) acted impulsively against his fellow man (John 18:10-11); (c) denied Jesus three times (Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18,25-27); (d) was overwhelmed by his failure (John 21:3) & (e) acted hypocritically before the church (Galatians 2:11-21; Paul then “withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed”—a confrontation that would have been considered insolent if Peter was the “head of the church”). We should not belittle Peter, but we must understand that Peter, like all servants of God, had his faults and should never be considered **greater** than the other apostles, or any other Christian (cf. Matthew 11:11).

CONCLUSION

Neither Jesus, nor the apostles, nor the early Christians considered Peter as superior to the other apostles. He was simply a man privileged to be part of the apostolic ministry and a member of the body of Christ, which is the church. **There is only one Head of the church, and that Head is Jesus Christ, not Peter (Ephesians 1:20-22; 5:23; Colossians 1:18; et al.).**

