

Was St. Peter Ever In Rome?

By A Catholic Apologist
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Objection: "How can today's Pope, the Bishop of Rome, be the modern-day successor to St. Peter when St. Peter himself never visited Rome?"

The case is stated bluntly by the Presbyterian minister Loraine Boettner in Roman Catholicism, the "Bible" of anti-Catholic Fundamentalism, first published in 1962: "The remarkable thing, however, about Peter's alleged bishopric in Rome is that the New Testament has not one word to say about it. The word Rome occurs only nine times in the Bible, and never is Peter mentioned in connection with it. There is no allusion to Rome in either of his epistles. Paul's journey to Rome is recorded in great detail (Acts 27 and 28). There is in fact no New Testament evidence, nor any historical proof of any kind, that Peter ever was in Rome. All rests on legend" (p. 117). Boettner's invective does not end there. He goes on to say: "Not one of the early church fathers gives any support to the belief that Peter was a bishop in Rome until Jerome in the fifth century. Du Pin, a Roman Catholic historian, acknowledges that the primacy of Peter is not recorded by the early Christian writers, Justin Martyr (139), Irenaeus (178), Clement of Alexandria (190), or others of the most ancient fathers" (p. 122).

REPLY

At the end of his first epistle St. Peter writes: "Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark" (1 Peter 5:13). St. Peter no doubt used Babylon here as an early Christian code word for Rome. St. John also uses the term Babylon in the Book of Revelation six times in the same way: "Then another angel, a second, followed, saying: 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication'" (Revelation 14:8). "The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath" (Revelation 16:19). "...and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations" (Revelation 17:5). "He called out with a mighty voice, Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" (Revelation 18:2). "...they will stand far off in fear of her torment, and say, Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come" (Revelation 18:10). "With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more" (Revelation 18:21).

Babylon in the Book of Revelation can only refer to Rome as it was the only "great city" in the time of Christ and the Apostles. Babylon proper in Mesopotamia had, by 100 AD, been reduced to insignificance. Other extra-biblical works also refer to Rome as Babylon, such as the Sibylline Oracles (5, 159ff.), the Apocalypse of Baruch (ii, 1) and 4 Esdras (3, l).

Boettner, however, dismisses the argument that Babylon in 1 Peter is a code for Rome, preferring to believe that St. Peter actually visited Babylon itself: "While there is no Scriptural evidence at all that Peter went west to Rome, here is a plain statement of Scripture that he did go east to Babylon.

Why cannot the Roman Church take Peter's word to that effect? There is no good reason for saying that Babylon means Rome" (p. 120). Boettner also asserts that St. Peter wrote I Peter (and probably 2 Peter) while in Babylon.

REPLY

All credible Scripture scholars believe that St. Peter wrote 1 Peter between 62 AD and 64 AD. This is due to the fact that St. Peter seems to have known St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (written during St. Paul's first Roman captivity which ended in 62 AD) and the absence of any reference to an official Roman persecution of Christians which began in August 64 AD. St. Peter outlines the same duties for slaves, wives and husbands as in Ephesians (5:22-33 and 6:5-8). To have such precise knowledge of this letter so soon after its composition, as well as being certain of its authenticity, St. Peter must have been in close proximity to St. Paul, that is, in Rome with him, not in far-away Babylon. Further, in the final farewell of 1 Peter, St. Peter mentions Silvanus and St. Mark. Silvanus, the bearer of 1 Peter, was a constant companion of St. Paul (Acts 15:22, 32, 40; 2 Corinthians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1) while St. Mark was with St. Paul in Rome during his first captivity (Colossians 4:10). Why would Silvanus be in Babylon with St. Peter if he normally travelled with St. Paul; and how could St. Mark so easily team up with St. Peter and be in Babylon so soon after being mentioned in Colossians 4:10 with St. Paul in Rome? The more likely answer is that they were with St. Paul and St. Peter who were both in Rome at the same time.

So much is also made of the fact that St. Paul never refers to St. Peter being in Rome in Romans or any of his Captivity Epistles. Boettner exclaims, "How strange for a missionary to write to a church and not mention the pastor! That would be an inexcusable affront" (p. 121). The answer is quite simple. Christians were well known and despised even before the first official persecution of Nero. The Emperor Claudius expelled all Christians and Jews from Rome in 50 AD because of their disputes over a man named "Christus." St. Peter was known as the leader of this seditious sect. (He was also an 'escaped prisoner' - condemned to death – from Herod's dungeon) It was therefore necessary to always conceal the identity and whereabouts of St. Peter in order to protect both him and the Christians he visited. Roman officials for security reasons routinely read mail. Hence the prudence on the part of early Christians not to mention the name of St. Peter or even Rome by its proper name in any important correspondence.

CHURCH FATHERS

As for Boettner's claim that "Not one of the early church fathers gives any support to the belief that Peter was a bishop in Rome until Jerome in the fifth century," let's look at the facts.

At his tenth Lecture at Free Trade Hall, Manchester, England, Autumn 1895, Herbert Cardinal Vaughan, Archbishop of Westminster set forth some of the early Patristic evidence in support of St. Peter's presence in Rome: (1) Tertullian (200 AD) speaks of St. Peter ordaining St. Clement in Rome (Demurrer [Prescription] Against the Heretics 32) and of St. Peter baptizing in the Tiber River (On Baptism 4). (2) St. Clement of Alexandria (Ante 217 AD) speaks of St. Peter proclaiming the word of God publicly in Rome (In Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6,14). (3) Caius (214 AD) referred to Pope Victor as thirteenth bishop of Rome after St. Peter (In Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 5,28). (4) St. Hippolytus of Rome (225 AD) names St. Peter as first bishop of Rome. (Dictionary of Christian Biography, I, 577). (5) St. Cyprian of Carthage (250 AD) speaks of the "the place of Peter" (Ep. Ad Anton.) and "the seat of Peter" (Epistle ad Cornel.). (6) Firmilian of Caesarea (257 AD) speaks of the "succession of Peter" and "the chair of Peter" (Epistle ad Cyprian).

(7) The Council of Sardica (342-343 AD) "honors the memory of the Apostle Peter" by referring appeals to the See of Peter (Canon IV and Epistle ad Julium). (8) Pope Julius 1 (337-352 AD) referred to the doctrines received by him as coming from St. Peter (Apud. *Apologia Athanasius* 35). (9) St. Athanasius (358 AD) called Rome the Apostolic Throne (the throne of Saint Peter) (*Hist. Arian. ad. Monach.* 35). (10) St. Optatus of Milevis says that the episcopal chair in Rome was first established by St. Peter, in which chair sat St. Peter himself (*Schism. Donatist.* II,2). (11) Pope Damasus (370 AD) speaks of the "Apostolic Chair in which the holy Apostle (Peter) sitting, taught his successors how to guide the helm of the Church" (*Epistle 9, ad Synod, Orient.* Apud *Theodoret*, V,10). (12) St. Ambrose (387-390 AD) refers to "St. Peter's chair" where "Peter, first of the apostles, first sat" (*De Poenit. I, 7-32, Exp. Symb. Ad Initia*nd.).

THE TOMB

The actual story of the discovery of St. Peter's tomb and his skeletal-remains is spread over centuries. On the site where St. Peter's Basilica now stands stood originally a chariot racecourse track built by the Emperor Caligula. All that remains of that racetrack today is the tall Egyptian obelisk standing in the middle of the piazza. Nearby, at a small distance from the stone structure of the racetrack, along the Via Cornelia, was a pagan burial-ground lying in a knoll called Vaticanus ("vatis" in Latin meaning prophet). It was in this burial-ground that the bones of St. Peter, wrapped in linen, were laid after his-martyrdom. St. Anacletus, third Bishop of Rome, erected a shrine over St. Peter's grave which was visible to all those who passed by Vatican Hill. This shrine, despite the persecutions, became a familiar meeting place for Christians from the beginning and was mentioned in the Acts of St. Sebastian and in the writings of St. Marcius and St. Maurus dating from the third century. In early fourth century, the Emperor Constantine allowed Pope Sylvester I to construct a large new church over the burial place of St. Peter and the remains of other early Popes now gathered there. The stones for this new church were quarried from the old racecourse and the structure of St. Peter's shrine became the high altar. Begun in 326 AD, this church was finally completed in 349 AD. It contained five naves, fifty-two altars with seven hundred candles burning day and night, and golden mosaics decorating the walls and arches.

The actual bones of St. Peter were ordered removed from their shrine by Constantine, covered in fine purple cloth interwoven with gold, put into a box and reposed in a niche of a nearby wall (Wall G) to protect them from humidity. This wall was later covered by red plaster. The original burial place of St. Peter was also walled off to protect it from injury and the outside world, only to become lost for the next sixteen hundred years. In 1506, it was decided, due to subsidence and decay, to replace the old church built by Constantine with a grand new basilica. In 1626, Bernini, testing the floor over St. Peter's burial place for the erection of his weighty Baldachin, came across numerous skeletons. These skeletons were arranged like spokes of a wheel, pointing to a central spot under the high altar. More than three hundred years later, Pope Pius XII, in March 1939, ordered excavations under St. Peter's to find "the fundaments of our faith." In a public radio broadcast on 23rd December 1950, the Pope announced to the world that the original tomb of St. Peter had been discovered. It lay 25 feet beneath the high altar and was decorated with Christian mosaics of a fisherman with a rod, one of the Good Shepherd, and another of Jonah and the whale. However, the bones of St. Peter still remained missing. Doctor Margherita Guarducci, a professor of Greek epigraphy, noticed that during the excavations for the tomb pieces of red plaster chipped off a nearby wall (Wall G) had Greek inscriptions carved on them.

The Greek letters "pe" in the form of a monogram appeared on every line of the wall to intercede for some departed soul. By chance, on 2nd August, 1957, a Jesuit excavator, Father Antonio Femra, noticed a piece one by three inches in size with the words "Petros eni" (Peter is here) on it and put it into his pocket and took it home. When Pius XII heard of this he ordered the Jesuit to return the fragment. Wall G also included many other references to St. Peter, accompanied by the names of Jesus and Mary, the letters "pe" joined in the form of a key, and the name of Peter intersected by the names of Jesus and Mary. All this indicated that the bones of St. Peter could not be far away. In fact, in 1942, an excavator named Giovanni Segoni had emptied the niche in Wall G. Included in the material collected were bones that were dusted and freed from the other rubble.

Without informing the excavators, Monsignor Ludwig Kaas, the administrator of St. Peter's Basilica, had the bones put into a wooden box and stored, firstly, in a damp area of the underground grotto and then in a cupboard of a basilica office. In 1962, these bones were analyzed by Venerando Correnti, one of Europe's most distinguished anthropologists. "The remains," he said, "are from a single male between sixty and seventy years, about five feet seven inches tall and of robust constitution. Judging from the soil, the body must have been buried in the earth. The bones - and not the body - were at some time wrapped in purple cloth." The fabric with the bones was interwoven with gold threads.

In February 1964, Pope Paul VI gave permission for further tests on the bones and the fabric. The analysis found, firstly, that the fabric was the same type used to wrap the bones of St. Peter when they were transferred in the time of Constantine; secondly, the earth particles covering the bones were found to be identical in type to the soil in St. Peter's original tomb. Other tests on the repository Wall G established that it was an ancient Roman work with absolutely no trace of later tampering or rebuilding.

The evidence all now pointed to only one conclusion. Pope Paul VI announced to one of the excavators that "those bones are like gold to us." On June 26, 1968, he surprised the world by announcing officially that the bones of St. Peter had finally been rediscovered and identified: "The relics of St. Peter have been identified in a manner which we believe convincing... Very patient and accurate investigations were made with the result which we believe positive." On the following day the Pope, in a solemn ceremony, restored the sacred bones to their ancient resting-place.

MORE ON THE CHURCH FATHERS

Dionysius of Corinth, to the then Pope Soter, (C. 170 AD) [In Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 2,25,8 (303 AD)]: "You have also, by your very admonition, brought together the planting that was made by Peter and Paul at Rome and at Corinth; for both of them alike planted in our Corinth and taught us; and both alike, teaching similarly in Italy, suffered martyrdom at the same time."

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies 3,3,2 (C.180 AD): "The successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient Church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul, that Church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the Apostles. For with this the whole world; and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the Apostolic tradition..." [There follows a list of the Bishops of Rome {Popes} from St Peter down to Irenaeus' day.]

St. Clement of Alexandria (Ante 217 AD), [In Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6, 14 (C. 303 AD): "When Peter preached the Word publicly at Rome, and declared the Gospel by the Spirit, many who

were present requested that Mark, who had been for a long time his follower and who remembered his sayings, should write down what had been proclaimed."

Tertullian, Demurrer [Prescription] Against the Heretics 36, 1 (C. 200 AD): "How happy is that Church... where Peter endured a passion like that of the Lord, where Paul was crowned in a death like John the Baptist's."

Eusebius Pamphilus, Ecclesiastical History 2,15, 4 (303 AD): "It is said that Peter's first epistle, in which he makes mention of Mark, was composed at Rome itself; and that he himself indicates this, referring to the city figuratively as Babylon."

Eusebius Pamphilus, The chronicle Ad An. Dom 42 (C.303 AD): "The second year of the 205th Olympiad (42 AD) the apostle Peter, after he has established the Church in Antioch, is sent to Rome, where he remains as bishop of that city, preaching the gospel for 25 years..."

Eusebius Pamphilus, The chronicle Ad An. Dom 68 (C.303 AD): "Nero is the first, in addition to all other crimes, to make a persecution against the Christians, in which Peter and Paul died gloriously in Rome."

St. Peter of Alexandria, On Penance Canon 9 (311 AD): "Peter, first chosen of the apostles, having been apprehended often and thrown into prison and treated with ignominy, at last was crucified in Rome."

Catechism of the Council of Trent (1566)

The Catechism of the Council of Trent did not directly refer to the question of whether St. Peter had ever been in Rome, but in Part 1, Chapter X quotes the following from St. Optatus of Milevis (Schism. Donatist. II,2): "You cannot be excused on the score of ignorance, knowing as you do that in the city of Rome the episcopal chair was first conferred on Peter, who occupied it as head of the Apostles..."

Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992): Likewise, the Catechism of the Catholic Church makes no direct statement on the question of whether St. Peter ever visited Rome, but re-affirms that the Pope is "the Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor" (No.882).
