

## Did the Author of I Peter See the Risen Jesus of the Gospels?

According to the story we find in the New Testament book of Mark, considered by many to be the earliest gospel, Jesus “ordained twelve” disciples, “that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses, and to cast out devils” (3:14-15). A man named Simon Peter is the first of the twelve disciples to appear in Mark’s listing (3:16). According to Matthew 4:18-20, Peter was a fisherman who abandoned his career to become a follower of Jesus, who was preparing his ministry to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). According to all four gospel narratives, Peter was present with Jesus throughout much of his ministry, attending Jesus’ many speaking engagements, hearing the master’s teachings, even experiencing many of Jesus’ miracles firsthand.

In all, the name ‘Peter’ appears in [93 verses](#) in the KJV versions of the four gospels alone, more than any of the other disciples. Without a doubt, Peter is not only a prominent character in the gospels, but if these stories are true, he would be eyewitness to the most significant events in early Christianity, such as Jesus’ performance of miracles and healings, the last supper, the passion, and finally the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. (1) And although there is no known contemporary documentation of Peter’s life or even existence outside the New Testament, the book of Acts portrays Peter as one of the two most important personalities involved in promulgating Christianity after Jesus’ ascension, the other of course being the apostle Paul.

The New Testament also contains two letters which bear the name Peter. They are typically titled I Peter and II Peter. And although Peter was, according to orthodox New Testament history, an unlearned Jewish fisherman (cf. Acts 4:13), both letters are written in polished Greek. Because of this, some have suggested that Peter was using a secretary to write the letters in Greek on his behalf, though the texts themselves do not make this claim. Despite this, many hoping to salvage Petrine authenticity do not easily relent on this point, even though it compromises the matter; as E. Eve writes, “the letter then becomes the product not of Peter, but of the secretary.” (2) Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that I Peter is earlier than II Peter, giving it more probability of being genuine. But many scholars have noted that, due to its references to persecution, it likely dates from post-70 AD, requiring Peter to be very old for the time which would be very unusual for a fisherman. Since II Peter is generally agreed to be too late to have been written by the Peter of the gospels (3), and therefore can safely be dismissed as pseudonymous, our interest is focused on I Peter and its claim to authenticity.

## Dating Clues

I Peter is addressed “to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (v.1), that is, to Christian believers who were living in various places throughout the region and apparently suffering persecution. The Greek word ‘[parepidemos](#)’ is sometimes translated as ‘pilgrim’, as in I Pet. 2:11, and is used to connote heaven as the Christians’ native home, and earth as merely a temporary dwelling. The use of the term ‘scattered’ (Greek ‘[diaspora](#)’) here suggests that the congregations addressed were unconnected or out of touch with each other, and by addressing a letter to all of them simultaneously, its author was seeking to bring unity to them by speaking to an issue that affected them mutually. This suggests a period after Paul’s missionary work (Bithynia-Pontus and Cappadocia had not, by all accounts, been missionized by Paul), thus requiring some time since Paul’s ministry for the church to develop and reach these “frontiers of the Roman Empire.” (4) By the orthodox timeline required by the gospels, already we’re moving decades after the resurrection.

Sailhammer explains that I Peter “was written to give hope and encouragement to Christians who were suffering for the sake of Christ,” and the author’s “starting point for hope in the Christian life is the resurrection of Christ (v. 3), but the focus of his hope is clearly set on Christ’s second coming (v. 5).” (5) The letter’s preoccupation with suffering and persecution is significant in terms of its implication for the date of the letter’s composition, and has led many scholars to suspect that the Peter of the gospels could not be its author. For instance, Emeritus Professor of the New Testament W. G. Kümmel highlights the implications I Peter’s concern for persecution has for dating the letter as follows:

The situation of persecution of those addressed can be understood only as occurring at the beginning stages of civil persecution... According to the unanimous tradition of the early church, the first persecution of Christians on more than a merely local basis (cf. 5:9) took place under Domitian. But that, of course, takes us beyond the life-span of Peter. (6)

Additionally, Elliott thinks it is "likely that 1 Peter was written from Rome sometime during the years 73 to 92 C.E.," since

Distance from the Pauline period and the early 60s is also indicated by the growth and coalescence of diverse traditions reflected in 1 Peter and the shift from an internal Jewish debate over the Mosaic law to a struggle of believers now labeled as 'Christians' with an alien and hostile society." (7)

Already we have some striking clues in 1 Peter which militate toward the view that the Peter of the gospels was probably not the author of the letter. The Peter of the gospels was an unlearned fisherman whose native tongue would most likely have been [Aramaic](#), and yet the letter is written in polished Greek. Furthermore, the locale of the letter's addressees and its preoccupation with the hostility that the Christian movement encountered in its neighbors (a far cry from the ready-made mass conversions of Jerusalem Jews reported in Acts), both suggest a post-Pauline period, pushing the date of its composition at least beyond the 70s. One wonders, if the author really were the Peter we read about in the gospels, why didn't he write (or dictate) his letter (and more like it) at an earlier time, closer to the events described in the gospels?

## A Deafening Silence

What is really interesting about 1 Peter, is that here we have a letter purported to be authored by the same Peter we read about in the gospels, *and yet it makes no mention whatsoever to any post-resurrection appearance by Jesus*. As we saw above, the gospels depict Peter as chief among the apostles, and according to 1 Cor. 15, Peter was the first to see the risen Jesus. (8) In fact, however, 1 Peter makes no mention of any of the details and events which Peter would have witnessed and which, according to the gospel narratives, were so important to the inception of Christianity, such as Jesus' miracles, his lessons in parables, healings and exorcisms, a betrayal by Judas, the empty tomb, etc.

To explain such omissions, apologists, insisting on 1 Peter's authenticity, would have us believe that Peter the disciple would have had no need to mention even one of his extraordinary experiences with Jesus as described in the gospels. Given the purpose of 1 Peter (as Sailhammer above put it, "to give hope and encouragement to Christians who were suffering for the sake of Christ"), this seems rather dubious. What is incontestable is that, were the Peter of the gospels the author of the letter, he would have had more than ample opportunity to seal the hope he sought to instill in his audience by referring to things he would have personally witnessed, just as today's preachers make use of the gospel stories to underscore the message they're trying to get across. Acts portrays Peter, in his public speeches, as referring to Jesus' "miracles and wonders and signs" (2:22), alluding to the empty tomb (2:29), even performing many miracles and healings himself (cf. 2:43, 3:6, 5:12, etc.).

## Missed Opportunities

1 Peter is full of opportunities where we could reasonably expect the Peter of the gospels to make mention of the signs and wonders and risen Jesus that he purportedly saw firsthand in order to further the purpose of his letter. And yet its author makes no use of these opportunities.

For instance, 1 Peter 1:21 states that "God... raised [Jesus] up from the dead, and gave him glory, that your faith and hope might be in God." But the author does not mention the gospel feature that Jesus was seen on earth in a physical body, both before and after his resurrection, either by the purported author of the letter or by others who had known and traveled with Jesus during his life on earth. And although Peter was, according to the gospels, a major participant in Jesus' ministry from its beginning, present no doubt at many of Jesus' speaking engagements and a hearer of Jesus' teachings, parables and prayers, the author of 1 Peter never attributes any of his exhortations or words of wisdom to the missionary Jesus of the gospels. On the contrary, as do Paul and other epistle writers, the author of 1 Peter finds ample occasion to cite the Old Testament. 1 Peter 2:13-14 contains the following advice:

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers.

Does it seem likely that someone familiar with the gospel's passion events, which has Jesus being sent to the cross by the Roman authority of Pontius Pilate, would say that "governors... are sent by [the Lord] for the punishment of evildoers"? According to 1 Peter 2:22, Jesus "did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth," and yet was put to death *like an evildoer* under the authorization of a Roman governor. Commentators may quote 1 Pet. 2:24's "by whose stripes ye were healed" as a reference to the passion events of the gospels. However, this appears to be

variation of Isaiah 53:5, which states:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

Indeed, as with the Pauline epistles, the writer of I Peter relies on Old Testament texts to describe his Jesus' suffering, *rather than on anything we find in the gospels*. Not only this, the writer also relies on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, rather than on the Masoretic text or an Aramaic targum as we might expect if the author of this letter were actually the Peter of the gospels. Scholars have noted that the use of this source by the author of I Peter indicates a native familiarity with Greek and Greek sources that the Peter of the gospels most probably would not have had. P. J. Achtemeier says of I Peter:

The absence of influence from the language of the Hebrew Bible or the Targumim on the one hand, and the clear influence of the LXX on the other, show that the author was at home in Greek rather than Semitic culture, and such is likely not to have been the case with Simon Peter. (9)

Again, instead of any direct and unambiguous reference to the gospels' passion scenes, which depict the crucifixion in a specific place and at a specific time, with specific characters performing specific roles, I Peter's depiction of Jesus is compatible with the conception of Jesus found in the Pauline epistles - that is, a Jesus which was crucified and resurrected in a distant, unspecified past, wholly bereft of the kinds of details we find in the gospels. A.E. Harvey, whose concern is to defend the miracle stories found in the New Testament gospels and other Christian stories, makes a crucial admission relevant at this point:

We know from the epistles that it was possible to speak and write about Jesus without any mention of his miraculous power. (10)

How could this be in the case of a letter bearing the name of a key player in the gospel stories? How could this be in the case of someone who is said to have seen firsthand things that no other human being has seen? How could this be in the case of a man who abandoned his life as a fisherman in order to follow a worker of miracles which he would have witnessed for himself, and even experienced firsthand? Perhaps I Peter was written too early for the miraculous tradition ascribed to Jesus in the gospel legends to have been included in a letter bearing the name of one of Jesus' most important disciples? Perhaps I Peter was written by someone who did not know that any miracles had been performed? The apocryphal book [The Acts of Peter](#), written in the latter half of the second century (11), was late enough to include references from the gospel stories. In this text, the miracle of walking on water is mentioned, a miracle that Matthew 14:22-31 has Peter enjoy firsthand. But the Acts of Peter dates late enough for the legends found in the gospels to have circulated and become associated with literature attributed to personalities who are mentioned as disciples of Jesus.

I Peter thus shows more affinity and familiarity with Paul's letters than with any scene found in the gospels, and yet it is purported to have been written by one of Jesus' closest companions. Unlike later texts bearing the name of the famous disciple, nowhere does I Peter mention any of the miracles attributed to Jesus in the gospels and to which they portray Peter a witness. It seems that, if the Peter depicted in the gospels were writing "to give hope and encouragement to Christians who were suffering for the sake of Christ," as Sailhammer puts it, then references to the power that the purported author had witnessed - if in fact he had witnessed any miracles to begin with - would have advantaged his purpose vastly more than merely explaining to his readers that "in their sufferings they share in the sufferings of Christ" (12), and promising an experience of joy at some unspecified point in the future. Specifics always seem to be far more effective in making a case than do appeals to vague approximates, such as we find in I Peter. This should not be taken to mean that the points that the author does offer in the interest of bolstering his readers' encouragement should have been *replaced*, but rather *supplemented* with firsthand testimony of the events we read about in the gospels, had he actually witnessed them. Unfortunately, they aren't.

Another missed opportunity is found in I Peter 3:19, which mentions that Jesus "went and preached unto the spirits in prison" after he was, according to the KJV's version of 3:18, "quickened by the Spirit." By some apologists' interpretation of this passage, this means that Jesus was made "by the Spirit" to rise in a *physical* body - a detail not stipulated by any New Testament text prior to the gospels, and yet I Peter makes no mention about Jesus preaching to his followers on earth after he was resurrected. The whole sequence that I Peter gives in 3:18-22 is as follows:

- a. "put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit" (3:18)
- b. "preached to the spirits in prison" (3:19)
- c. "gone into heaven and is at God's right hand" (3:22)

with no mention of *appearances to believers on earth*, such as we find in the gospels, *such as the alleged author of*

*the letter itself is said to have witnessed.*

Chapter 4 of I Peter opens with more references to Jesus suffering in the flesh, but again, we find *no references* to details from events that Peter would have witnessed *according to the gospels*. The author does not tell his readers about the anguish he would have experienced as he watched Jesus being flogged as he carried the heavy wooden cross up to Golgotha (cf. Mark 15:20f). He doesn't mention Jesus being adorned with a crown of thorns (cf. Mark 15:17, Matthew 27:29; John 19:5). He tells his readers in 4:13 that they are "partakers of Christ's sufferings," but he gives nothing specific to indicate what kind of suffering Jesus endured, other than that he was crucified. According to the gospels, however, Jesus was already suffering before he was nailed to the cross. But we wouldn't know this from the epistolary record. Like other epistles in the New Testament, I Peter does not even mention the malefactors who were crucified beside Jesus.

I Peter's fifth chapter begins with the author identifying himself as "a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed" (v. 1), but he does not identify himself as a witness of a *risen, physical Jesus* who, according to the gospels, appeared in Jerusalem (or was it Galilee?) and mingled with the faithful. Achtemeier takes "the reference to 'witness' in 5:1... to mean Peter is calling himself an eyewitness to the passion of Jesus." (13) Notice how this assumes that the gospel Peter is the author of I Peter, in spite of the complete absence of references to any gospel detail in the letter.

### **Conclusion: I Peter is Not Authentic**

This whole letter, purported to have been written by someone whom the gospels paint as a star eyewitness to the resurrected Jesus, presents a context which is difficult to reconcile with that gospel record. And the same situation is repeated throughout the NT epistolary record, save for in some of the later epistles, which, according to many scholars, are pseudonymous. Clearly, if there was opportunity for this writer to identify himself as a witness of Christ's sufferings as we find them described in the gospel narratives, there was more than such in the case of I Peter if in fact its author had seen the resurrected Jesus as the gospels tell us. Indeed, this would have only encouraged the intended readers of the epistle to remain steadfast and hopeful, which is one of the chief messages it tries to convey to them.

Donald Guthrie tells us that

As an eyewitness of the risen Christ Peter would never forget the profound impression which that stupendous event made upon his mind... (14)

And although we can reasonably expect the same of anyone who would have been in the position of the man named Peter by gospels, this supposition alone makes it very difficult to believe that the author of the letter bearing Peter's name in the New Testament was the same individual we read about in the gospels. Was the eyewitness of Jesus during his lifetime and post-resurrection appearances the author of I Peter? W. G. Kümmel writes:

I Pet contains no evidence at all of familiarity with the earthly Jesus, his life, his teaching, and his death, but makes reference only in a general way to the 'sufferings' of Christ. It is scarcely conceivable that Peter would neither have sought to strengthen his authority by referring to his personal connections with Jesus nor have referred to the example of Jesus in some way. (15)

The evidence simply does not add up to Petrine authenticity. What we have in I Peter is precisely what we would expect if, in the first century, there were diverse views of Jesus, just as today there are competing strains of Christianity. The letter's conspicuous omission of allusions to events which according to the gospels the disciple Peter would have witnessed in person, is not explained by a dearth of opportunity to introduce them, but by the fact that the author simply did not know of them. For surely had the author witnessed the miracles attributed to Jesus during his ministry, and the appearances Jesus is said to have made in the flesh and on the earth after his resurrection, he would have had ample opportunity to point to them in substantiating the message of hope that he wanted to deliver to his fellow believers.

### **Notes:**

(1) Of course, Peter would not have been a witness of the virgin birth ascribed to Jesus by the gospels of Matthew and Luke. But then again, what NT writer could have witnessed this?

- (2) *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, p. 1263.
- (3) A summary of some reasons why II Peter is widely agreed to date from the 2nd century is provided [here](#).
- (4) J.R. Michaels, (*Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, art. "1 Peter"; see also J.H. Elliott, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, art. "First Epistle of Peter")
- (5) *NIV Compact Bible Commentary*, p. 577.
- (6) *Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 418f, 424.
- (7) *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, art. "First Epistle of Peter"
- (8) Incidentally, Paul makes no mention of Jesus being seen by any women, even though according to the gospels the first to encounter the risen Jesus were women. But even on this point, the gospels are not entirely uniform. As Wells points out:
- This sorry of guards who saw the angel, knew that the tomb was empty, and had to be bribed by the chief priests to pretend that the body had been stolen while they were asleep (Mt. 28:11-15), shows that Christian tradition does not, after all, uniformly make only women the initial witnesses concerning the resurrection. (*The Jesus Myth*, p. 132)
- (9) *A Commentary on First Peter*, pp. 6-7.
- (10) *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, p. 98; quoted in Wells, *The Jesus Myth*, p. 142.
- (11) Cf. Stoops, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, v. 5, p. 267.
- (12) Sailhammer, *op. cit.*
- (13) *A Commentary on First Peter*, p. 9.
- (14) *New Testament Introduction*
- (15) *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 424.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 PM](#)

### 3 Comments:

[Daniel Morgan](#) said...

3:18-20 are often cited by Evangelicals and Roman Catholics as referring to Jesus going down into Hades (c.f. Eph 4:9, Isa 44:23, Acts 2:24-30, *Lymbus Patrum*)

An odd doctrine, to be sure, but some claim that the gospel had to be preached to all, present and past, to be received or rejected. Obviously, if some disembodied glowing spirit floats down into a pit dug beneath the earth where dead souls are, it is a little different for them to accept/reject this story than for us.

Also, in ch5, "a witness of the sufferings of Christ" could refer to the persecutions of the followers of Christ, could it not?

[May 29, 2006 4:49 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

I would say you're correct - in fact, it is more than only a little different for those who were "in prison", especially if they had empirical evidence of the magic spirit flowing down amongst them, telling them that if they believe in it,

they can be rescued. Not only do they have firsthand proof of the magic spirit's existence, they also have firsthand proof of the torture chamber that the deity found in its eternal wisdom to rig up for them, both of which we are denied. Who among those so imprisoned would say no to anyone claiming to come to rescue them? Notice the presumption of selfishness involved here: If it saves my skin, I'll do it. And yet, Christians criticize Objectivism for its selfishness. Go figure.

I'm reminded of Luke 16:31, which has Jesus say "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

This of course depends on how I might learn of the one who "rose from the dead." If I saw this with my own eyes firsthand, I would not need to have heard Moses and the prophets, or be persuaded by what has been attributed to them, to acknowledge what I have seen. Verses like this are provided in the bible (put in Jesus' mouth to assure their claim to authority) to give believers a way to barricade themselves in their confessional investment so that they do not have to soil their hands with the task of actually validating their beliefs. This allows the believer to dismiss the fact that we today are denied any firsthand evidence of the kind that Jesus' disciples and "the spirits in prison" allegedly enjoyed. After all, today's believers "believe" without such objective witness. The essence of "Christian epistemology" (if one could call it this) is belief on someone's say so, without any substantiating objective input. One could take the Christian believer's own "method of knowledge" and apply it to The Wizard of Oz, and come out believing in witches, tin men and the Emerald City.

Both Eph. 4:9 and Isaiah 44:23 speak of a place described as "lower parts of the earth." But where are these "lower parts of the earth"? If this is merely metaphor, why do not believers allow that the very notion of 'hell' is also a metaphor? As with the idea that Jesus "descended" from heaven to come "down to earth," as even today's apologists assert, is that such expressions clearly imply a flat earth. Jumbo jet pilots and NASA astronauts should refine their radar equipment so as not to fly into a floating throne.

Regards,  
Dawson

[May 29, 2006 1:51 PM](#)

[Steven Carr](#) said...

'All flesh is grass' writes the author 1 Peter 1

Wasn't Peter supposed to be the person who knew best of all that not all flesh is grass?

[June 26, 2006 1:22 PM](#)