

Doubting Peter 2

By Graham Osborne

In my last column, we looked at the clear testimony from Scripture pointing to Peter's leadership of the early Church, in a perpetual office founded by Jesus himself. But some still try to challenge this truth by appealing to several rather surprising arguments.

The first claims that Peter, the supposed first Pope and Bishop of Rome, was actually *never in Rome*, insisting that there is no Biblical or historical evidence of this being true! I have read Protestant ministers who have adamantly claimed both of these statements – and they are both just flat out false!

Turning to Scripture, we have Peter's final greeting from his first epistle: "The church here in Babylon, united with you by God's election, sends you her greeting; so does my son, Mark" [1 Peter 5:13].

"Babylon" was a first century Christian code word for pagan Rome, and could not possibly refer to the one-time capital of the Babylonian empire – now just an insignificant village. The early Church, and virtually every Church Father who has commented on this verse, understands "Babylon" here as symbolically representing pagan Rome.

The great early Church historian Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, adds credence to this Roman identity, noting that Peter "came to Rome, and was crucified with his head downwards", adding, "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."

The Book of Revelation also refers to "Babylon" at least six different times, and the only plausible options for its identity in this context are either Rome or Jerusalem. But Virtually all scholars agree that, again, "Babylon" must be a reference to pagan Rome here, as Revelation 11:8 clearly refers to Jerusalem as "the great city which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified." That would leave Rome as the only logical option for "Babylon".

Several first-century apocryphal books [4 Ezra and the Apocalypse of Baruch] also use this "Babylon code" to mean Rome, as does the esoteric second century B.C. *Sibylline Oracles*, further confirming that this symbolism was in relatively wide use in the first century A.D.

But unequivocal confirmation of Peter's time in Rome comes through the clear testimony of early century historians. The early Church Fathers were unanimous in their testimony that Peter went to Rome, and there is not a single ancient writer that testified to Peter dying anywhere but Rome.

The earliest reference comes from St. Clement of Rome, the fourth Pope and Bishop of Rome, and ordained to the priesthood by St. Peter himself. Around A.D. 70 to 95, he addressed a strongly authoritative letter to the Church in Corinth [he could do this because he was the Pope!], noting that Peter ended his life in the same place Paul ended his: “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 but many labors, 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... these men ... being the victims of jealousy, set a brave example **among ourselves**” (i.e. in the Church community at Rome).

Adding further veracity to this testimony, around A.D. 200, the great Christian theologian, Tertullian, would write: “How happy is that church [Rome] . . . where Peter endured a passion like that of the Lord, where Paul was crowned in a death like John’s (the Baptist).” He would then add that Rome was, “where Clement was ordained by Peter.”

In A.D. 110, St Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, himself a prisoner on his way to Rome to be martyred, would reference Sts. Peter’s and Paul’s presence in Rome, claiming his *Letter to the Romans* lacked the authority that these Apostles had taught them with: “Not as Peter and Paul did, do I command you [Romans]. They were apostles, and I am a convict” (Letter to the Romans 4:3 [A.D. 110]).

Perhaps the most powerful testimony from the greatest theologian of the early post-apostolic era comes from St. Irenaeus. Writing forcefully in A.D. 189, he states: “Peter and Paul were evangelizing in Rome and laying the foundation of the Church... we shall confound all those who... assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here the succession 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. With that church [Rome], because of its superior origin, all the churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world, and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition.” It just doesn’t get much clearer than that!

Writing in the second century as well, St. Clement of Alexandria would note that, “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.”

Similarly, the greatest Scripture scholar of the first millennium, St. Jerome records: “Simon Peter ... chief of the apostles, after having been bishop of the church of Antioch ... pushed on to Rome in the second year of Claudius to overthrow Simon Magus, and held the sacerdotal chair there for twenty-five years until ... the fourteenth, year of Nero. At his hands he received the crown of martyrdom being nailed to the cross with his head towards the ground and his feet raised on high, asserting that he was unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord.”

And finally, the great St. Augustine: a towering theologian, and highly regarded by Catholics and Protestants alike. He would refer to, “the chair of the Roman church in which Peter sat, and in which Anastasius [the Pope of Augustine’s time] sits today.”

Even respected Protestant scholar, D.A Carson in his highly acclaimed, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, acknowledges that Peter was, “in Rome about A.D. 63 (the probable date of 1 Peter). Eusebius implies that Peter was in Rome during the reign of Claudius, who died in 54.”

Additionally, John Evangelist Walsh’s book, *The Bones of St. Peter*, provides fascinating corroborating archaeological testimony, adding powerful historical confirmation of Peter’s presence at Rome.

But to be sure, whether Peter was in Rome or not takes absolutely nothing away from his indisputable role as the clear leader of the New Testament Church – the first Pope. But clearly, Rome was the center of the world at this point, and both Peter and Paul realized that this is where they must eventually go to build the foundation of the Church’s hierarchy. So to Rome they both went.

The second claim often made against Peter’s leadership is that St James the Greater, the first Bishop of Jerusalem, actually lead the Church. This is based on James’ actions at the “Council of Jerusalem” in Acts 15, where Paul and Barnabas come down from Antioch to meet with the Church in Jerusalem to get an authoritative decision on whether the new Gentile converts to Christianity must follow the Old Testament Jewish ceremonial laws [613 of them!], including circumcision and various dietary restrictions.

Acts 15:4-29 details this council and clearly shows Peter speaking authoritatively as the leader, settling the actual doctrinal question the council had convened to discuss: whether it was necessary to circumcise the new Gentile converts and “charge them to keep the law of Moses” [Acts 15:5]: “Brethren, you know that ... God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe ... why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to

bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. And all the assembly kept silence” (Acts 15:6-12).

But “*after* they finished speaking”, St. James adds the following: “my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood.”

While James does seem to speak authoritatively here as well – and well he should, as he is an Apostle and the Bishop of Jerusalem, where this council is being held – even a cursory reading of his directives show that he has not addressed the main doctrinal issue of the council at all: how are the Gentiles saved? James simply adds four directives on important, but lesser, matters that were typical problems that Gentiles often faced as they converted to Christianity. It is Peter that unequivocally leads the council and settles the main doctrinal question, silencing the council in the process – because he is the Pope!

A final effort to reject Peter as the authoritative leader of the early Church rests in Galatians 2:11-14, where St Paul confronts and corrects Peter, essentially accusing him of hypocrisy: withdrawing from eating with the Gentiles because he was afraid of what the Jewish converts from Jerusalem might think of this.

But St Paul is absolutely right here. Ironically, Peter who so boldly spoke on this same matter in Acts 15 above, now shrinks from some of the very same men he had authoritatively addressed at the Council of Jerusalem. But this is not a matter of authority, or of doctrinal error, but more of questionable judgement.

Should Peter have kept eating with the Gentiles? Maybe. But even St. Paul would write that, “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). He even circumcised Timothy in Acts 16:1-5, and purified himself at the temple in Acts 21:26 in order not to scandalize or offend the Jews, especially those who had recently converted to the Christian faith.

Perhaps Peter felt this was not the time and place to stir up gentile/Jew contentions. Perhaps he thought it needed to be done gently, diplomatically. But whatever the case, again, this is not a situation of doctrinal error or superior authority on the part of St Paul. At worst, it might constitute venial sin, or maybe imprudence or poor example on Peter’s part.

While the Pope *is* protected by the charism (gift of the Holy Spirit) of infallibility – he cannot teach error when teaching officially on clearly defined matters of faith and morals for all the faithful to believe – this certainly does not mean he will be perfect or without sin in his personal life and actions. Even the great St John Paul II went to Confession every week! That doesn’t mean he wasn’t the successor of St. Peter!

In the end, it is understandable when some of our separated brothers and sisters try to undermine the office of the papacy, or question St. Peter's role as the first Pope or leader of the Church instituted by Jesus. Because if Jesus founded a Church, and left us a blueprint for it that included an authoritative, perpetual office, wouldn't it at least give you pause if you weren't part of it?

In my next article, we will look at the early Church and see if we see such an authoritative, Papal office extending into the first centuries of Christianity. SPOILER ALERT! We absolutely do! Don't miss it!