

Gospel Advocate

Published weekly at 110 Seventh Avenue, North, Nashville, Tenn.

ESTABLISHED 1855

Entered at post office at Nashville, Tenn., as second-class matter.

VOLUME XCVII, No. 17

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE, APRIL 28, 1955

\$3.00 PER YEAR, IN ADVANCE

Was Peter Ever in Rome? The Biblical Evidence

FRANK PACK

Why should anyone be interested in such a question as the one at the head of this article? It would seem to be a purely academic one. Yet in reality this is the basic question underlying all the Roman Catholic claims to the primacy and infallibility of the pope of Rome. According to Roman Catholic teaching, the fundamental doctrine of the church is the primacy and infallibility of the pope as the successor to Peter, whom they regard as the prince of the apostles. Christ instituted the papacy and made Peter the first pope over all the apostles and the church, according to Catholicism. Peter founded the church of Rome, having gone there in later life and spent the last part of his life there. He was the first bishop of Rome, and as its first bishop exercised his authority over all the church from Rome. This position of primacy and authority as the infallible head of the church, he transferred to his successors in the see of Rome. Thus, his successors, as bishops of Rome appointed in his name, have all the authority he is supposed to have had. The present pope is the successor of Peter, occupying Peter's chair, according to Catholic doctrine, and exercises his rule as Peter's successor. But if Peter was the first bishop of Rome, he must have come there at some time before his death, established the church there, picked his successor, and died there. Consequently, the importance of this question to the whole fabric of Roman Catholicism is very evident. The paucity of the evidence for his ever having been in Rome will certainly be surprising to those who have never investigated the subject carefully, and should prove interesting to the average reader.

The standard Roman theory concerning Peter's journey to Rome, and his stay in Rome, is found in Jerome's writings of about A.D. 400. Jerome states, "Simon Peter, after being bishop of Antioch, went on to Rome in the second year of Claudius' reign and there held the sacerdotal chair—*cathedralem sacerdotalem*—for twenty-five years until the last year of the reign of Nero, under whom he was crucified with his head downward, saying that he was not worthy to be crucified in the way the Lord was." (Quoted in Schaff, *Our Fathers' Faith and Ours*, pp. 251, 252.) Thus he was supposed, according to this later tradition at the beginning of the fifth century, to have been in Rome from about A.D. 42 to A.D. 67, a pe-

riod of twenty-five years, the major part of Claudius' reign and all of Nero's reign. Many modern Roman Catholic scholars have given up this position long held by the Catholic Church concerning Peter's stay in Rome due to the problems it presents in the light of the New Testament.

WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE?

Disappointing as it may seem for the Roman Catholic position, there is no evidence in the New Testament for Peter's having ever been in Rome. Much in the New Testament may be judged to be contrary to it. It was the silence of the New Testament concerning such a visit that made the Waldensians in the Middle Ages oppose the Catholic teaching. This same silence is very important as we study the subject today.

Peter was certainly not in Rome when Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans from Corinth about A.D. 57 or 58. Although the sixteenth chapter is filled with the longest list of personal greetings found in any of Paul's letters, not one hint of greeting to Peter is found there. It is unthinkable that Paul, who had been a guest in Peter's home for fifteen days in Jerusalem on one occasion (see Gal. 1: 18) and knew him well, would have ignored his presence in Rome if Peter had been there at the writing of the Roman letter. That Peter had not been there at a previous time is also evidenced by Paul's statement, "For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established." (Rom. 1: 10.) It is unthinkable that, if Peter were residing in Rome and thus able to confer on the Roman brethren such spiritual gifts, Paul should so desire to come and impart to them some spiritual gift to establish them firmly in their faith. Paul also lays down the principle in this book that he has always endeavored to preach the gospel where Christ has not already been preached, and where no other man has worked. (Rom. 15: 20.) Yet he seems ready to preach the gospel in Rome with all his powers. (Rom. 1: 15, 16.) The absence of all mention of Peter in Paul's letter to Rome is a very powerful argument against Peter's having been in Rome up to that time.

Later in Paul's life, after suffering imprisonment in Palestine, he came to Rome as a prisoner awaiting trial and resided there for two years. (Acts 28: 30, 31.) During this time (possibly about A.D. 61-63) he wrote four

(Continued on page 335)

Was Peter Ever in Rome? The Biblical Evidence
(Concluded from page 321)

letters, commonly known as the Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. At the conclusion of the Colossian letter, he mentions a number of companions, and states, "These only are my fellow-workers unto the kingdom of God, men that have been a comfort unto me." (Col. 4: 11.) While both Mark and Luke are mentioned in this letter, no mention is made of Peter. In fact, in none of these letters is mention made of Peter. Again it is unthinkable that Peter should have ignored Paul in prison if he had been in Rome, and what could we think of Paul if he had ignored all interest in him from Peter, should Peter have lived in Rome as the Roman Catholics claim.

Indications from other passages in the New Testament are that Paul was released from prison for a short time, and again imprisoned not long before his death. While in prison awaiting death, he wrote Second Timothy. In this last letter, he reminds Timothy that at his first de-

fense (trial) no man stood by him, but all forsook him. (2 Tim. 4: 16.) He also mentions that only Luke accompanies him, and he desires to see Timothy before he is offered up. (2 Tim. 4; 11.) Where is Peter and why is Paul so strangely silent about him? This letter must have been written not earlier than the fall of A.D. 63 or possibly A.D. 64, yet there is no mention of Peter's presence in Rome.

No evidence can be found in Acts concerning Peter's presence in Rome. The last mention is in connection with the conference in Jerusalem in Acts 15 in which James seems to be presiding, and Peter, along with Paul and Barnabas, is a speaker. Acts 12: 17 mentions that he went to "another place," which Roman Catholics say is Rome. This is pure conjecture, as anyone can see. Any other place would suit the expression "another place" just as well.

Two letters written by Peter are found in the New Testament. In 1 Pet. 5: 13 Peter writes, "She that is in Babylon, elect together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Mark my son." This letter is written to the elect who were "sojourners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." The passage in 1 Pet. 5: 13 is fastened upon by Roman Catholics as evidence that Peter wrote this letter from Rome. They interpret the word "Babylon" here as indicating Rome. While the book of Revelation refers to Rome as Babylon, it is hard to believe that Peter is referring to Rome here. This epistle is written in direct language, with no symbolic meanings attached, and to have only one word placed in the midst of the letter bearing such a symbolic meaning is hard to understand. B. H. Streeter in *The Primitive Church*, p. 117, writes, "It is surely very strange that anyone writing an actual letter from Rome itself should date it as from Babylon. To call Rome Babylon is entirely consonant with the fiery symbolism of the Apocalypse; it is appropriate in a work like the *Sibylline Oracles*, which is not only apocalyptic in spirit but metrical in form. But in the sober prose of a letter it seems out of place, and quite extraordinarily so in this particular letter."

It is also interesting to notice the corroborating evidence given this point by the learned classical scholar, E. T. Merrill, writing in *Essays in Early Christian History*, p. 282. "When a simple straightforward and otherwise unimpeachable interpretation is discarded in favor of one that lacks these qualities, the probability is that something has gone wrong in the valuation of evidence. The interpretation of St. Peter's epistle as dated from an actual Babylon is perfectly natural, and in itself unobjectionable. It is safe to affirm that no doubt about it would ever have been raised unless the later story of St. Peter's Roman ministry had been created and sadly needed the clothing of substantiation. Moreover, the attribution of a mystical meaning to the place named Babylon in the latter appears in itself unreasonable. The apostle had not been talking in apocalyptic language anywhere else; why should he interpolate here a single enigmatic word? What possible purpose could it serve? And how could a simple-minded Cappadocian, let us say, be expected to understand it in any other than its literal sense?"

It seems to this writer that these objections are very strong against identifying the letter of First Peter as being written from Rome instead of Babylon. That a strong Jewish colony existed in Babylon is a matter of fact. Peter's mission as stated in Gal. 2: 8 was to be mainly to the Jews, and it is not at all unthinkable that he was there writing to these Christians in Asia Minor.

Another fact that lends weight to this is that this letter was accepted and used earlier in the eastern churches than in Rome and the western churches, which would be natural if it had first been written and used in the Babylon and Asia Minor districts. The ignorance of the Roman church concerning this letter is good evidence that Rome was not the place of its writing.

The absolute silence of the New Testament concerning a Roman visit of Peter is overwhelming to any believer in the New Testament's authority. In the next article we shall examine the evidence in the post-apostolic writings for such a visit.

He cleanses the guilty conscience and removes the burden of guilt. David knew whereof he spoke when he wrote "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." (Psalm 32: 1.)

Although for the remainder of his days upon the earth David had to reap the harvest of sorrow and shame which came as a result of his sin, nevertheless, he found peace and hope in the Lord's forgiveness. One should beware of sowing wild oats because one may have to continue reaping them years and years after he has repented and been forgiven.

Was Peter Ever in Rome? The Traditional Evidence

FRANK PACK

In the first article on this question the Biblical evidence for Peter's visit to Rome was examined and found to give no support to such an idea. The next body of evidence that is strongly relied upon by Roman Catholic scholars to establish Peter's presence in Rome is the citations found in the writings of the group known as "church fathers."

FIRST CLEMENT

The earliest uninspired document following the New Testament is the epistle written by Clement from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth, usually dated about A.D. 96. The Corinthian church had suffered internal strife and trouble, particularly involving some of the leaders in the church. This letter written in the name of the Roman church admonishes the church at Corinth to settle their differences. In pointing out how jealousy and envy have caused difficulties, Clement makes use of Old Testament worthies who suffered wrongfully through these two sins. Then he passes to the apostles, after having noticed such Old Testament characters as Abel, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and others who suffered through jealousy. The following statement is the basis for claiming that Peter was martyred in Rome along with Paul. "Through jealousy and envy the greatest and most righteous pillars were persecuted and condemned to death. Let us set before our eyes the good apostles. Peter, who through unrighteous jealousy endured not one or two but many labors, and having so borne witness, proceeded to his due place of glory. Through jealousy and strife Paul displayed the price of endurance." (I Clement, ch. v.) There is no mention of Rome here, for the place of martyrdom is not in view. One might just as well argue that all of the worthies mentioned in this section of the work were martyred in Rome as to state that this proves Peter was martyred in Rome. It would certainly have been easy for Clement to have appealed to the Corinthians in the name of Peter and have emphasized his own authority, if he were the bishop of Rome as the Roman Catholics claim he was at this time. This quotation is certainly scanty evidence upon which to found so important a claim.

IGNATIUS

Ignatius, on his way to Rome to suffer martyrdom in the first quarter of the second century, wrote to the church at Rome, stating, "Not as Peter and Paul do I give you orders. They were apostles, I am a convict."

However, this does not mean that he recognized that they both were in Rome and Peter was the head of the Roman church. Instead, he is simply stating here that he did not possess apostolic authority as they did to command. His authority was not on the level with the authority of the apostles. Not much evidence can be drawn from this one quotation.

JUSTIN MARTYR

Justin Martyr, who lived and wrote from Rome around the middle of the second century, addressed extensive defenses to the Roman emperor in behalf of the early church. In the *Apology*, he describes in detail the worship and indicates the simplicity of church organization in Rome in the middle of the second century. Justin is strangely silent about any connection of Peter with the Roman church, and since he was a member of the church at Rome and knew it well, this is hard to explain if Peter had actually lived and died there. Justin does mention a Simon who worked magic and was a sorcerer in Rome during the days of Claudius. It is probable that this Simon was later confused with Simon Peter when the need came to connect an apostle with the founding of the Roman church.

With Justin a period of almost a hundred years following the supposed time of Peter's residence and death in Rome is concluded, and yet no definite mention of Peter's Roman connection can be pointed to in the early literature.

LATE SECOND CENTURY EVIDENCE

The first connection of Peter with the church of Rome is cited by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Eusebius quotes Dionysius of Corinth writing to the Romans about the year A.D. 170 as stating that Peter and Paul planted the churches at Rome and at Corinth. "Both of these having planted us in Corinth, and having in like manner taught in Italy, suffered martyrdom about the same time." It is very evident to any student of the New Testament that the above statement of Dionysius concerning Corinth is false, because Peter did not found the Corinthian church. That Paul was in Rome is definitely taught in the Bible, but that both founded the church in Rome is not taught. Not even Paul can be so credited.

Rapidly in the latter part of the second century the idea spread that both Peter and Paul founded the Roman church. In the writings of Irenaeus (about A.D. 185) both Peter and Paul are credited with founding the Roman church. Working in Gaul, or what is now France, Irenaeus was endeavoring to show the churches where the faith had been kept inviolate from heresy. These he contended were those which could trace themselves back to an apostolic foundation. The desire of all churches to find an apostolic founder in this period led many groups to build "traditions" concerning their apostolic founders as a bulwark against the heretical sects of the time. Irenaeus was wrong in associating Paul with the founding of the Roman church, and from Biblical evidence we have seen he is just as erroneous in associating Peter with its founding. Even if it could be proven that Peter died in Rome, his death there would not prove he founded the Roman church.

By about A.D. 200 the Roman church claimed to have

located the burying places or memorials of the two apostles in bolstering their claim. Caius is quoted by Eusebius as saying, "I can show you the trophies of the apostles. For if thou wilt go to the Vatican or to the Ostian road, thou wilt find the trophies of those who founded this church." These trophies seem to have been certain spots assigned by the Romans as the burying places or the places of execution of the apostles. Just what the trophies consisted in is not at all clear. There are several traditions concerning the resting place of the two apostles that conflict with one another in the third century. It was one of these trophies supposedly under the Vatican, that the present pope claimed to have discovered. With considerable fanfare he announced to the world that the grave of Peter had been discovered under the Vatican, but the evidence has never been made available to non-Catholic scholars for their investigation. All the reports made available to them are the reports of the Catholic excavators, writing under the pope's authority.

To carry this development further from the time of Caius, Tertullian, writing shortly after the middle of the third century, was the first to state that Peter died by crucifixion. Origen writing toward the middle of the third century was the first to contend that Peter had been crucified head downward because he felt unworthy to be killed like his Lord. Thus, step by step, the tradition grew that connected Peter with the Roman church. As this tradition grew, the name of Paul in connection with the Roman church was suppressed, with this suppression getting into full swing in the third century.

The very best that can be said for the traditional evidence is that the tradition is late, uncertain, and mixed with much fanciful material. No positive connection is established until more than a hundred years after the death of Peter (that is, the supposed death in Rome, A.D. 67). It might be well to state in concluding, that should later archaeological excavation prove without doubt that Peter did die in Rome as a martyr, the Roman Catholic claim that he ruled as the first bishop of Rome, and Peter's successors as bishops of Rome are the heads of the church would still be without scriptural foundation and without historical support from the early period.

What we have endeavored to show in these two articles is how scanty the evidence for Peter's ever having been in Rome actually is. It is hard for us to believe in the light of this study that he was ever there.
