

DID PETER GO TO ROME IN AD 42?

By JOHN WENHAM

On the day when this article was begun, *The Times* (16.3.72) on its front page carried a headline across five columns: 'Scroll fragments put accepted date of the Gospels in doubt.' It referred to an article in *Biblica* 53 (1972) by J. O'Callaghan which reported the finding at Qumran of what was apparently a fragment of St Mark's Gospel, to be dated only about twenty years after the death of Christ. Whether this identification is confirmed or not, time will tell; but the possibility of such a discovery shows how urgent it is that those who believe in early dates for the Synoptic Gospels should state their reasons. From the point of view of Christian apologetics the importance of the question as to whether to date these Gospels in the 70s, 80s and 90s on the one hand, or in the 40s and 50s on the other, can scarcely be exaggerated.

There are two solid arguments for early dates. Firstly, in all three the fall of Jerusalem is forecast at great length, but no suggestion is made that the prophecy had been fulfilled at the time of writing. This is an argument from silence, but it is quite difficult to imagine that the fulfilment of so cataclysmic a prophecy should have been passed by without mention. (By contrast it will be observed that the fulfilment of the prophecy of world famine in Acts 11:28 is immediately mentioned.)

Secondly, the argument (associated especially with A. Harnack) for dating Acts in 62,¹ at the point where the story ends, is cogent. The reader waits breathlessly to hear what happens at Paul's trial, but is never told. Harnack's argument is said to be facile, but the alternatives are unconvincing; they derive their force from the belief (which I am sure is correct) that Luke's Gospel was written before Acts and that it made

¹ The exact chronology is not important. The table on p. 102 is based on F. F. Bruce's dating in *Acts*, Tyndale Press, London (1951), 55f., which on the whole seems more satisfactory than that of G. Ogg, *The Chronology of the Life of Paul*, Epworth Press, London (1968), 200. Many of the dates are approximate only.

use of Mark, and from the belief (which I question) that *Mark could not have existed at so early a date*. Luke's Gospel, which the prologue suggests was the result of careful research, is better dated before the shipwreck (in which all manuscripts would have been destroyed) than after. Luke was nearby during Paul's two-year stay at or near Caesarea about 57-59, and this would make a very suitable period for the final preparation of his material for publishing.² Is it conceivable that Mark was written even earlier?

It is hardly conceivable if we take seriously (as we must) the strong tradition that Mark's Gospel in some way represents the teaching of Peter in Rome, and if we take the usually accepted view that Peter did not get to Rome until the 60s. If however—as I wish to argue—we put Peter's first visit to Rome in 42, the whole position is revolutionized.

I have to confess that such an idea had never made any serious impact on my mind till a couple of years ago, when I chanced upon a popular book by G. R. Balleine, entitled *Simon Whom He Surnamed Peter* (Skeffington, London, 1958), which argued that the 'another place' to which Peter went after he had been released from prison in Acts 12:17 was Rome. The idea was so novel and the implications so far-reaching that I felt scarcely able to trust my own judgment in the matter. Further reflection, however, has made me feel that the case is sound and that it should again become a subject for serious study by Christian scholars.

Admittedly there is a great weight of authority to discourage it. Here are typical statements by fairly conservative scholars: C. S. C. Williams: 'the Roman Catholic Church claims that Peter went at an early date to Rome and spent twenty-five years there, but there is no evidence for this. . . . The tradition . . . is abandoned by the best Roman Catholic scholars.' E. G. Selwyn: 'The tradition . . . is on many grounds improbable.' F. F. Bruce: 'The tradition . . . is contradicted by the evidence of the N.T.' Most important is the verdict of J. B. Lightfoot, whose truly magisterial handling of the material

² The beginning and end are recorded in Acts 21 and 27, which are 'we' passages. Incidentally J. D. M. Derrett's studies in *Law in the New Testament*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London (1970), pay particular attention to Luke's minutely accurate preservation of Jewish and Palestinian elements in the teaching of Jesus.

has greatly influenced all subsequent writers: 'It is wholly unhistorical'; 'quite inconsistent with known facts. . . . If silence can ever be regarded as decisive its verdict must be accepted in this case.'³

Yet there have been voices on the other side. While not going back to 42, T. W. Manson was prepared to argue for a first visit *c.* 55.⁴ Similarly H. Lietzmann, author of a special study *Petrus und Paulus in Rom*, also thought that Peter had visited Corinth and had 'quite probably' gone thence to Rome.⁵ In addition to Balleine's contribution, all the other three major works on Peter in English this century have been quite disinclined to dismiss the early tradition. J. Lowe says: Peter 'might well have been there earlier' than the date of the Epistle to the Romans (say 57). F. J. Foakes-Jackson says: 'That Peter visited Rome after he had escaped from Herod Agrippa's prison is perfectly possible.' F. Underhill says: 'It seems likely . . . that St. Peter . . . [in 42] made his way to the Eternal City.'⁶ There is thus no *prima facie* case against looking at the evidence afresh.

Direct evidence for Peter's movements after the death of Stephen are scanty: we find him at Samaria, and (initiating the first Gentile mission) at Caesarea and at other places in Palestine. During Agrippa's reign (41-44) he escaped from Jerusalem and fled Agrippa's territory. He was in Jerusalem again for the famine visit of Paul and Barnabas in 46 and for the Apostolic Council of 49. He visited Antioch (Galatians 2:11) and had associations with the churches in northern Turkey (1 Peter 1:1). In 54 Paul can speak of Peter 'leading around a

³ C. S. C. Williams, *Acts*, A. & C. Black, London (1957), 149f.; E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of Peter*, Macmillan, London (²1947), 61; F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, 248; J. B. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers* Pt. 1. *S. Clement of Rome* I, 340; II, 490f. O. Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, SCM, London (²1962) says concerning Peter's episcopal status: 'All these statements [about Peter receiving the episcopal office] stand in such flagrant contradiction to The Acts and the letters of Paul that it is unnecessary even to discuss them' (p. 113, n. 72). But on the question of a visit to Rome in 42, he seems to leave open the barest possibility: 'The wording does not permit the identification of the "other place" with Rome . . . (It) can be identified with any city of the Roman Empire' (p. 39).

⁴ T. W. Manson, *BJRL* 28 (1944), 130f.

⁵ H. Lietzmann, *Beginnings of the Christian Church*, Lutterworth Press, London (1949), 111.

⁶ J. Lowe, *Saint Peter*, OUP, London (1956), 28; F. J. Foakes-Jackson, *Peter: Prince of the Apostles*, Hodder & Stoughton, London (1927), 195; F. Underhill, *Saint Peter*, Centenary Press, London (1937), 207.

wife', presumably moving from place to place in missionary work (1 Corinthians 9:5). Beyond this we are left to inference.

The later lists of the bishops of Rome credit Peter with a twenty-five year episcopate—the *Liber Pontificalis*, for instance, makes it twenty-five years, two months, three days, and the *Liberian Catalogue* twenty-five years, one month, eight days. The months and days in these lists were unknown to Eusebius and were evidently late additions to the original lists. It is impossible to check the chronology completely, but judging from the checks which are possible there is reason to believe that it is basically sound. As is to be expected, there is stronger ground for believing in the accuracy of the lengths of the later episcopates than of the earlier ones. The later figures are known to have been based on documentary evidence, whereas the sources of information for the earlier figures are unknown. For this reason the first-century dates are treated with great reserve, and it has been possible to dismiss the twenty-five year episcopate of Peter without compunction. It is argued that no credence should be given to this tradition, since patently Peter was not in Rome when he was in Jerusalem or Antioch around 46–49, nor in 57 when Paul wrote his letter to Rome (with its many salutations), nor in 60 when Paul landed in Italy, nor when he wrote Colossians. The second century had its Christian fantasies, such as the *Clementine Recognitions*, and this tradition is written off as pure legend too.

But, while it is not possible to prove that the earliest parts of the lists were based on reliable evidence, it must not be lightly assumed that they were not. If it can be shown that the reasons for rejecting the twenty-five year episcopate are themselves invalid, we must give considerable weight to such early documentary evidence as we possess. It is worth noting that twenty-five was not a sacred number such as might have appealed to an imaginative hagiographer.

In its earliest use *ἐπίσκοπος* was not a technical term and it would have been appropriate, for instance, to Paul as non-residential overseer of the churches which he had founded. If Peter twenty-five years before his death worked for a time in Rome and kept in touch with the church thereafter, he could rightly have been regarded as its overseer. The fact that our only explicit evidence is late is not surprising, in view of the

systematic destruction of Christian books in the Diocletian persecution. Eusebius and Jerome, who were no simpletons and must have known from the New Testament that Peter was not resident in Rome for much of the time, accepted the twenty-five years' episcopate. Jerome, as secretary to Pope Damasus, had access to the episcopal archives, which, in spite of losses during persecution, doubtless contained much information now lost to us. In any case the idea that Peter and Paul (Peter nearly always being mentioned first) were in some sense the *founders* of the Roman Church was a general belief towards the end of the second century. Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* iii. 3.1), for example, speaks (in about 180) of 'the very ancient and universally known church . . . founded and organized at Rome by . . . Peter and Paul'. Paul could be described as 'founder' of the church only in a very loose sense, so that it is unwise to read too much into this description written by one who was looking back after more than a century's interval. But it is perhaps a little difficult to account for this term if neither apostle appeared on the scene until several years after the faith of the church had become world-famous (Romans 1:8). It would, however, have been easy to couple the illustrious name of Paul to that of Peter, when in retrospect it was seen how the hand of God had brought both of them to the capital of the empire, not only to establish and build up the church but also to earn a martyr's crown.

Chronologically the twenty-five year 'episcopate' spans the period from Agrippa to Nero neatly. Agrippa's reign was 41–44 and Nero died in 68, which tallies well with Eusebius who dates the episcopate from 42 to 67. That Peter *could* have escaped to Rome is clear enough. 'There was no small stir . . . over what had become of Peter. And when Herod had sought for him and could not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death' (Acts 12:18f.). Agrippa was in deadly earnest and Peter in deadly peril. To escape to a neighbouring province would have been to invite extradition, but the ports (where Peter had friends) were full of ships waiting to take the Passover pilgrims home. Peter could have escaped to Egypt, Ephesus, Carthage, Spain, but none of these places claims him. The most likely place in the world to harbour an escaped prisoner was also the home of a vast Jewish population;

Rome presented to the one who was later to be described as 'the apostle to the circumcision' an open invitation to an inexhaustible field of work.

There seems to be absolutely no reason why Peter should not have gone there, unless Luke's cryptic statement that he 'went to another place' proves to be an insurmountable obstacle. If Peter went to Rome, why does not Luke say so? It is of course impossible to know for certain, but it is well to bear in mind that Luke is a past master at avoiding things which lie outside the scope of his book, and it could be that at this point (in Blaiklock's words) 'he is preparing to usher Peter from the stage, as Paul steps to the forefront. The apostle to the Jews has played his part. He has, in fact, prepared the way for the apostle to the Gentiles'.⁷ To have mentioned Rome at this juncture might have evoked a crop of side-tracking questions which would have distracted the reader from following Luke's developing story.

A more probable reason, however, is this. If, as we have argued, Acts was published in Rome while Paul was awaiting trial, and if (as seems likely) it had the part-purpose of inclining those in positions of influence to look favourably on Christianity, it might not have seemed tactful to call attention to the fact that the church of Rome was founded by a much-wanted criminal who was a fugitive from justice. His alleged deliverance from prison by a miracle might not have carried sufficient conviction to offset the fact that he was a man wanted by the law. Looked at in this light the cryptic phrase (which is really rather odd) suddenly makes sense. Any other destination could have been mentioned by name without embarrassment, and one would have expected such mention, but Rome was the one place that required disguise.

It thus seems untrue to say that the possibility of a period of work by Peter in Rome, beginning some twenty-five years before his death, is contradicted by the evidence of the New Testament or is inconsistent with the known facts; it also seems untrue to say (as we have just seen) that the one superficially serious objection to the hypothesis really presents any difficulty; furthermore it is untrue to say that the hypothesis is based on an argument from silence unsupported by positive evidence.

⁷ E. M. Blaiklock, *Acts*, Tyndale Press, London (1959), 99f.

The unwavering tradition of the Roman Church is itself weighty evidence, and we believe that the literary argument for the early date of the Synoptic Gospels provides further evidence.

In addition, the significance of Paul's remark in Romans 15:20–24 needs to be carefully weighed. In spite of his longing of many years to come to them, he was intending only to pay a passing visit to Rome, 'lest' (he said) 'I build on *another man's* foundation'. This suggests (what missionary experience in general confirms) that the church of Rome did not arise through the chance movements of Christian converts, but was in large measure the result of one man's vision and work. Paul's firmness in this matter gains added point, if the other foundation-layer was the very man whom he had agreed was to be acknowledged as the leader in the establishment of (predominantly) Jewish churches, while he was to be acknowledged as the leader in the establishment of (predominantly) Gentile churches (Gal. 2:7–9). Paul's concern for the unity of the church kept him steadfastly loyal to his agreement. C. K. Barrett speaks of 'the delicacy of the situation that leads to the obscurity of Paul's words' in this passage.⁸ The delicacy of the relation between the two apostles may well have been part of the reason for the delicacy of the situation.

Another scrap of positive evidence is to be found in the presence of a Cephas-party in Corinth. It is evidence of the kind so effectively used in an earlier generation in William Paley's *Horae Paulinae* (1790) and in J. J. Blunt's *Undesigned Coincidences* (1847). Relatively insignificant details from three separate documents dovetail to make a coherent little piece of history. Acts 18:1–3 tells us that by edict of Claudius (in 49) all Jews were expelled from Rome and that some of them, including Aquila and Priscilla, settled in Corinth. Romans 16:3 (written in 57) shows that this couple returned to Rome, and a good many others with them—if we may judge by the number of Paul's personal greetings. 1 Corinthians 1–4 (written in 54) tells us that at Corinth there were not only groups that looked for inspiration to Paul and to Apollos (who are known to have worked in Corinth), but there was also a group (which receives slightly less emphasis) that looked to Cephas.

Peter might conceivably have visited Corinth and left behind

⁸ C. K. Barrett, *Romans*, A. & C. Black, London (1957), 277.

a band of enthusiastic admirers, but it hardly seems likely, in view of the agreed division of spheres of responsibility between Peter and Paul, that he would have considered it either necessary or wise to ignore his agreement and risk creating friction by working in a Pauline church. Alternatively, a group of Peter's converts might conceivably have come to settle in Corinth from some place other than Rome. But it would have been a remarkable coincidence if two groups had migrated to Corinth—one group, which is *unknown* to history (or tradition), coming from an unidentified place where Peter *had* in fact been working; and the other group, which (as we have just seen) *is* known to history, coming from Rome, where Peter had *not* in fact been working (even though several lines of evidence suggest the contrary).

Mark fits readily into this suggested pattern of events. If Peter did go to Rome as suggested, we may believe that he proceeded to evangelize its teeming Jewish population with energy and determination. It is unlikely that he was content to work single-handed. There were many Christian workers who had become mature and experienced in the twelve years since the end of Christ's ministry, of whom Mark was doubtless one. Peter left for the 'other place' from Mark's home and Mark may well have gone with him on his journey. If not, he was presumably summoned to join him soon after. This ties in with the witness of Papias, Irenaeus, the Anti-Marcionite Prologue, Clement of Alexandria and Origen which points to an association of Peter and Mark in proclaiming the gospel in Italy. Others like Rufus and Alexander, sons of Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21; Romans 16:13), seem to have come over to Rome too, since they were known to Mark's readers.

Now while Peter was in Rome, a highly successful work amongst Gentiles was developing in Antioch, which had begun with the witness of some 'men of Cyprus and Cyrene', and had resulted in 'a great number' believing. Barnabas, himself a Cypriot, was sent down from Jerusalem, and he in turn sought the help of Saul, then at Tarsus (Acts 11:19–30). The development of Gentile work created enormous tensions between Jerusalem and Antioch⁹ and these may well have been the cause of Peter's leaving Rome. Agrippa was dead, and with

⁹ It is worth considering whether the teaching on faith and works in the Epistle of James (2:14–26) is not James' comment on an oral report of Paul's teaching,

the church involved in the greatest crisis of its history, the chief of the apostles may have seen it as his duty to leave his own important work in order to tackle the situation. In any case we find Peter in Jerusalem in 46, when Saul and Barnabas brought the famine relief.¹⁰ He took counsel with James and John, and the three of them received Paul and Barnabas and it was then that they came to an understanding about their respective spheres of work.

Peter's departure from Rome seems to provide the ideal *Sitz im Leben* for the writing of Mark's Gospel. His converts' desire for a permanent record of his teaching, and the uncertainties concerning the future of the Jewish population which culminated in the order for their expulsion from the city in 49, would both have made its writing desirable. It is reasonable to suppose that Peter left Mark behind and that he then wrote his Gospel. It would take us beyond the scope of this article to piece together from the New Testament and tradition the subsequent movements of Peter and Mark, though these may well have included a further period of work by the apostle in the capital before his final visit and martyrdom. Suffice it to say that a remarkably coherent picture emerges when the twenty-five year 'episcopate' is rescued from the limbo of 'wholly unhistorical' legend and restored to its place as one of the probabilities of history.

Chronological Table

Crucifixion	AD 30	<i>Galatians</i> written	48
Paul's first visit to Jerusalem	35	Apostolic Council in Jerusalem	49
Agrippa becomes King	41	Claudius expels Jews from Rome	49
Arrest and escape of Peter	42	<i>Romans</i> written	57
Death of Agrippa	44	Paul detained at Caesarea	57-59
Peter back in Jerusalem	46	<i>Luke</i> written	59
<i>Mark</i> written?	46	Paul detained in Rome	60-62
Paul and Barnabas take famine relief to Jerusalem	46	<i>Acts</i> written	62
Paul's first missionary journey	47-48	Death of Paul	65?
Peter visits Antioch	48	Death of Peter	67?

and *Galatians* and *Romans* Paul's rectifying of the misunderstanding. James is no answer to Paul, but Paul is to James.

¹⁰ Gal. 2:1-10. This assumes that *Galatians* was written before the apostolic council in Acts 15. If it was written after, it would involve the improbable conclusion that Paul ignored the findings of the council, in spite of the fact that they lent massive support to his argument against the necessity for Gentile circumcision. In contrast, when *Romans* came to be written eight years after the Council, the question had ceased to be a burning issue.