

Attitudes to Jewish and Roman Power in the *Gospel* and *Acts of Peter*

Markus Bockmuehl

1 The Complex Peter of Scripture and Reception

Simon Peter's historic footprint in early Christian texts and traditions is one of multiple tensions and contradictions.¹ We have Peter the uneducated fisherman and yet the confident public speaker and miracle worker. The religiously conservative and potentially militant country bumpkin and the outward-looking pioneer of a missionary agenda open to Samaritans and to Gentiles, from Palestine across Asia Minor to Rome. Peter the eyewitness and the pillar, the timid deserter and the martyr, the apocalyptic visionary and yet paradoxically the reposer and guarantor of narrative tradition about Jesus of Nazareth.

This sheer ambiguity and multidimensionality of images, evidence, and texts can be disorientating throughout the history of interpretation reception, whether one begins with Paul's polemical early testimony about Peter in the New Testament letter to the Galatians, or probes backwards from later texts of Roman or Eastern (e.g. Pseudo-Clementine) origin, or for that matter from early modern clashes between traditionalist Catholic and hyper-Paulinist Protestant polemics. In other words, this complex persona of early Christian memory does indeed appear to combine within himself the tensely complementary vectors of pioneering innovation and 'anchored' tradition.

2 Peter as Legitimator of Ecclesial Power?

One still finds Peter popularly interpreted as an implicit legitimator of power – especially the power of a church historically prone to excesses of clericalism

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and privilege, but also to concordats or tacit collusions with oppressive regimes through the ages. This accusation that the Petrine office serves as a cover for unjustified or abusive assertions of power is by no means an innovation of the 21st century, but dates back to the second or even the first.²

After all, did not already the New Testament's first letter attributed to the apostle deploy him in the service of an instruction to submit to every human institution, from marriage to slavery all the way to the Emperor himself (1 Pet 2.13–3.8)? And did not this same Peter, empowered in Matthew as the key holder of the kingdom of God and the rock on which the church would be built (Matt 16.17–19), go on to take upon himself in the Acts of the Apostles the sort of disciplinary power over life and death that might befit an aspiring autocratic ruler of the church (Acts 5.1–11)?

This brief study provides no occasion to dismantle such facile polarizing scripts for the historical footprint of Peter, which have in any case fortunately fallen out of favour among more thoughtful writers on the subject. Broadly speaking, the Apostle is now rather less commonly depicted as a vacillating irrelevance, a polarizing conservative opponent of the true (read: Pauline) gospel, or for that matter the primarily mythical figment of authoritarian 'early catholic' churchmen. And in relation to Roman power the New Testament Peter advocates both submission to imperial authority *and* resistance to imperial persecution emanating from 'Babylon' almost in the same breath (cf. 1 Pet 2.13–17 with 5.8–10, 13).

It does, however, seem worthwhile to query and problematize the assumption of an early Petrine legitimation of power by examining briefly his portrait in two highly influential second-century documents.

2.1 *Jewish and Roman Power in Early Christian Apocrypha*

Second-century Christian apologists frequently deal with themes like the unreasonableness of pagan religion, the unlawfulness of the Roman treatment of Christians, and the rebuttal of slanderous popular prejudice about Christian immorality – not uncommonly including incest and cannibalism.

2 In the second and third centuries here in view, critiques of Roman or Petrine ecclesial authority occasionally surfaces among writers from Asia Minor in relation to the date of Easter (e.g. Polycrates: Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 3.31.3; 5.24.2) and to the status of the apostolic tombs (the Montanist Proclus in debate with Gaius the Elder: Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 2.25.7). In a less institutionally focused way, the probably Egyptian *Gospel of Mary* is also critical of Peter – though this appears here to concern not his ecclesial authority but his exclusion of Mary Magdalene on the grounds of her sex (as already in *Gospel of Thomas* 114). In the third century, a clearer case in point is the dispute between Cyprian and Pope Stephen about Rome's handling of the validity of heretics' baptism (Cyprian, *Letter* 75.6.2, 16.1, 17.3).

Not many of these relatively intellectual apologetic concerns surface in typically non-elite Christian apocryphal literature, which almost invariably addresses the needs of a more popular audience.³ Nevertheless, the martyrs' acts do share an explicit concern with the experience of persecution.

While the topic of martyrdom itself – including that of Peter under Nero – has been the subject of quite sharp critical debates in recent years,⁴ there is little doubt that the ebb and flow of real or perceived Roman oppression does provide the context in which these texts need to be understood. There were indeed substantial periods of relative calm and tolerance in each of the first three centuries, some ancient and later Christian rhetoric notwithstanding. Yet recent scholarship has also shown the Imperial view of the world to require widespread consent and consensus about the rule of Roman law and Roman culture, including the universal acceptance of an approved state pantheon.⁵ While there is little or no evidence of any concerted Empire-wide action against Christians in the first couple of centuries, irritation at the nuisance and obstinacy of Christian non-participation in this consensus is already evident in local Roman accounts like that of Pliny the Younger (c.61–c.112) in Bithynia, and continues to be a feature of many of the well-known martyrs' acts.⁶ A little later the more sophisticated apologists especially of the third century, like Tertullian or Lactantius, began to appeal more extensively to Roman legal principles of jurisprudence and fair trial.

Actual accounts of persecution in the apocrypha are remarkably unspecific, and tend instead to deploy familiar tropes of imperial oppression in which the individual persecutors appear, whether named or anonymous, primarily as apparatchiks for the brittle and bungling structures of power that they represent and on whose behalf they act.⁷ The character depiction of both Roman and Jewish opponents tends to be flat and hackneyed, typically manifesting little discretion or strength of mind, and these figures are indeed 'fickle, fearful and passionate' rather like the Emperor himself.⁸ Roman officials appear in the popular Stoic caricature as immoderate men governed by their passions

3 Rightly noted by Moss (2015) 381.

4 E.g. Moss (2013) and reviews by Radner (2013) et al.

5 So e.g. the justly influential work of Ando (2000) 407 and *passim*.

6 So also Moss (2015), citing Rordorf (1982), Sherwin-White (1963) and others. It is conceivable that Pliny's account of anti-Christian measures in Bithynia (*Letter* 96) is in part anticipated a little earlier in a text like 1 Pet 4.12–19, also addressed *inter alia* to Bithynia (1.1).

7 Cf. Moss (2015).

8 Moss (2015) 383.

of irrational anger and fear by contrast with Christians, whose conduct is principled but even-tempered and reasonable.⁹

The causes of such hostility and persecution are rarely clear in these writings, but they do sometimes attribute them to resentment or jealousy. The former appears because of the effect the Christian preaching repeatedly has on the conversion of women who then resolve to be celibate and thus incur the wrath of their non-Christian husbands. This is a motif that has rightly been recognized as of symbolic implication for Christianity's affirmation of the spiritual and social status of women. It also has the effect of questioning and reconfiguring Roman marriage conventions as indicative of the Roman social and political order as a whole.¹⁰ A motivation of *jealousy* by contrast tends to arise in relation to *religious* rivals, including false prophets and Jewish opponents.¹¹

3 Two Case Studies: the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Acts of Peter*

My two case studies instantiate and focus these general observations for the case of Peter. One could instead have selected a number of other apocrypha from this period. These two, however, have in their favour a notable degree of influence and popularity. In the case of the *Gospel of Peter* this is documented by a relatively modest but early and sustained basis of ancient citations and manuscript attestation beginning in the second century,¹² while the Petrine *Acts* seem after their second-century origin to have grown and generated a substantial body of ancient manuscripts, translations and highly influential secondary apocrypha including the Pseudo-Clementines.¹³

For present purposes, both texts matter not only for their relative prominence, but because they permit an interesting correlation in the apocryphal Petrine attitude to Jewish and Roman power in the martyrdoms of Jesus and of his apostle, respectively. Although originating from different geographic

9 Moss (2015) 384: 'The passion of the judges is offset by the calmness of the martyr's response. As stubborn as they were, the apostles remain composed. They never match the prosecutor's tone, only his rhetoric.'

10 Cf. Moss (2015) 385.

11 This is evident in the *Acts of Peter* in relation to Simon Magus, and perhaps to a lesser extent in the *Gospel of Peter* in relation to Jewish authorities. But it is also notably relevant in relation to 1 *Clement* 5, where 'jealousy' may well mean religious 'zeal'. See Bockmuehl (2010) 114–32.

12 P.Oxy. 2949 and perhaps 4009; early mentions by Serapion in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.12.3–6; Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17.

13 See e.g. Thomas (2003) 40–71 and *passim*; Baldwin (2005; 2008).

and chronological settings in the second century, what makes this correlation interesting is that both documents explicitly articulate their views of Jewish and of Roman authority in the voice of the apostle himself. (This is in contrast to the authorial attributions of a number of other apocrypha, Petrine or otherwise, which may turn out to manifest few specific connections in the texts themselves.)

By way of orientation to these second-century texts that are no longer widely known today, we will set both of them in context before turning to specific passages.

3.1 *The Gospel of Peter*

Like other early Christian apocrypha, the *Gospel of Peter* has attracted lively scholarly debate in recent years, including major new commentaries.¹⁴ Although in antiquity it was in certain circles preserved and read (or at least known about) for several centuries, our knowledge of this text today derives entirely from manuscript discoveries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The main text fragment was found in 1886–87 in a seventh-century parchment codex in a monastic tomb at the site of Akhmim in Upper Egypt. In addition to a brief extract from what was soon widely accepted as the Gospel of Peter, the same codex contained the *Apocalypse of Peter*, parts of the Greek version of *1 Enoch* 1–27 and a martyrdom of St Julian. The *Gospel of Peter*'s original date of composition is now widely agreed to be in the second half of the second century.¹⁵

In terms of its narrative content, our single seventh-century Akhmim MS of the *Gospel of Peter* concerns the story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion and especially the events that follow it. Despite some enthusiastic scholarly advocates, substantive textual continuity with one or (less likely) two second-century fragments from Oxyrhynchus certainly cannot be taken for granted. Much of the overlap with P.Oxy. 2949, for example, depends on reconstructions from the Akhmim text, while the *Gospel of Peter*'s attestation in other papyri is still less likely.¹⁶ Nevertheless, some motifs of a continuous tradition may be detected even in the absence of extensive *verbal* stability between Oxyrhynchus and Akhmim.

14 Foster (2010); Nicklas (*forthcoming*); see previously Kraus & Nicklas (2004; 2007); also Vinzent and Nicklas (2012).

15 Foster (2010) 172 suggests 150–190 CE. The critical issues surrounding this fascinating text are more fully discussed in Foster's commentary and other recent literature. See also Bockmuehl (2017).

16 See my discussion of P.Oxy. 2949 and related fragments in Bockmuehl (2017) 147–50.

The extant story opens with ‘the Jews’ refusing to follow Pilate’s example in washing his hands (*Gos. Pet.* 1; cf. *Matt* 27.24). Interestingly, ‘the Jews’ are here clearly instantiated in the Jewish authorities,¹⁷ at first specifically Herod Antipas ‘and his judges’. Joseph (presumably of Arimathea) asks his ‘friend’ Pilate for Jesus’ body before the crucifixion takes place. But it is Herod who commands Jesus to be taken away with explicit orders to ‘do to him as I ordered you’ (ἔσα ἐκέλευσα ὑμῖν ποιῆσαι αὐτῷ ποιήσατε, 2). And it is Herod who confirms that Jewish unlike Roman law requires the burial of the crucified.

Preparations for the killing are described in remarkably violent terms: the mob continues to ‘drag’ Jesus to the site of the crucifixion, mocking him as they go and exulting in the ‘power’ (ἐξουσίαν, 6) they wield over him.

In the entire discourse Jesus speaks only once, in a striking alteration of the Marcan cry of dereliction from the cross: ‘my power, the power, you have forsaken me’ (ἡ δύναμὶς μου, ἡ δύναμις, κατέλειψάς με, 19).¹⁸

The account *after* the crucifixion stresses the apostles’ fear of the Jewish authorities and elaborates in great detail Matthew’s story of the Roman guards at the tomb (*Matt* 27.62–66; 28.4, 11–15), identifying the centurion as Petronius, the attachment of seven seals to the tomb, the presence of Jewish elders and priests with the guard, and the nature of the night watch arrangements. An interesting feature of the narrative is the apparent repentance of the Jewish leaders ‘when they realized how much evil they had done to themselves’ (25).

Unlike in any of the canonical gospels, the rolling away of the tombstone by angels on Sunday morning is watched by the soldiers, their centurion Petronius and a number of Jewish leaders (34–37). Famously they also witness two angels exit the tomb supporting a third man and followed by a moving cross that reaches to heaven and confirms that Jesus has proclaimed to those who are asleep (41, see also Burnet’s contribution to this volume).

Several other accounts conclude the story about the bribing of the Roman guard and present an angelic appearance to Mary Magdalene and her friends (50–56). The manuscript breaks off with Peter, Andrew and Levi going back to fishing (58–60) – leaving us to speculate whether a further resurrection

17 This possibility of a more focused understanding of ‘the Jews’ in this text is often denied by commentators (e.g. Foster (2010) 298, 351–53, 414 and *passim*. A number of scholars, however, have in recent years called for a more nuanced interpretation: see my discussion in Bockmuehl (2017) 145–46 and literature cited there.

18 Scholarly explanations of this statement abound, and many plausibly suspect a christological explanation. If Matthew’s Greek translation at 27.46 was deemed problematic, a Gentile scribe attempting to secure a more acceptable interpretation of Matthew’s mysterious Hebrew might well be offered *חילי חילי* for an attempted vocalization of *הלי הלי* with a rough breathing – and hence ‘my power, my power’.

appearance like that at the Sea of Galilee in John 21 may have been intended to follow.¹⁹

In terms of the *Gospel of Peter's* relevance for the apocryphal Peter's relationship to power, perhaps the most important observation is the fact that responsibility for the actual execution of Jesus has more clearly shifted from Pilate and the Romans to 'the people' or 'the Jews', apparently the Jewish leaders, to whom he is in fact surrendered not by Pilate but by Herod Antipas (1; cf. e.g. 5–6, 14, 23).

In the New Testament, for all the responsibility borne by the scheming Jerusalem high priesthood or by the hostile complicity of pliable crowds (whom John too not infrequently calls 'the Jews'), it is Roman soldiers who carry out the crucifixion itself. Even so, the ambiguity of reference to the Jewish authorities in certain New Testament passages evidently engendered a well-known and notorious aftermath in the accusation that it was Jews – '*the Jews*' – who murdered Christ. Mark 15.16–24 and Matt 27.26–35 have Pilate handing Jesus over to 'the soldiers' who carry out the mockery and execution, but the grammar of Luke 23.13, 25–26 already appears to envisage the active involvement of 'the chief priests, the rulers and the people,' while John 19.15–18 has Pilate delivering Jesus over to 'the chief priests' who take him out to Golgotha where 'they' crucify him. Even a Pauline letter predating the composition of the New Testament gospels already affirms that 'the Jews ... killed the Lord Jesus' (1 Thess 2.15).

The *Gospel of Peter* takes this trend one step further. The Roman authorities, and Pilate in particular, seem *almost entirely* absolved of responsibility – setting the stage for subsequent Christian legend that went on to paint him even more positively as a convert or even a saint.²⁰ Yet Pilate is only 'almost entirely' absolved: there is an important qualification which we will note in a moment.

Meanwhile, what accounts for the intensification of hostility especially to the Jewish authorities? The most plausible analyses in my view tend to see here an apologetic motive re-appropriating the proto-canonical gospel narratives for the changed circumstances of a second-century context.²¹ On this reading the text sheds light on a setting in which Christians may have experienced Jewish rather than Roman hostility as the greater threat. This is perhaps

19 Cf. Bockmuehl (2017) 226–28 and *passim* on the surprising absence of matching (baptism-to-crucifixion) or rival biographical narrative frames in this and other non-canonical Gospels.

20 Both anti-Judaism and the whitewash of Pilate are taken considerably further in the medieval cycles of Pilate and Nicodemus literature. For further discussion see Bockmuehl (2017) 156–59.

21 Cf. e.g. Henderson (2011) 221–24 (and *passim*); Nicklas (2001).

paralleled in the so-called *Preaching of Peter* (*Kerygma Petrou*), as well as in the Greek *Apocalypse of Peter* (which turned up together with this *Gospel* in the same Akhmim MS). Analogous situations of heightened tension with a Jewish majority have of course been proposed for John's Gospel too.

Despite this possible setting, the picture of 'the Jews' in the *Gospel of Peter* remains in fact strikingly ambivalent: unlike in the New Testament, it is precisely the people of 'the Jews' who beat their breast in the face of the coming judgment as they acknowledge how evil their actions have been (25, 28; cf. Luke 23.48), since the executed 'Son of God' was 'righteous' (6, 9, 29). Indeed this lament for the injustice committed is carried out by 'all the people' (ὁ λαὸς ἅπας, 28). That said, we must note a significant and sustained contrast with the authoritative group of scribes, Pharisees and elders. A few scholars have suspected here a nuanced and deliberate distinction between what is said of the Jewish people and what is attributed primarily to their leadership.²²

Although Peter himself is hardly mentioned by name, he is in fact crucial to this narrator. To some extent his image as a witness and guarantor of the Jesus tradition is nourished by the Marcan and Synoptic narrative itself.²³ But for the *Gospel of Peter* this becomes explicit not just in the ancient title²⁴ but in the first-person narrative voice that speaks both in the plural for the disciples as a whole and in the singular in Peter's own voice. That voice is here deployed to lend the expanded passion narrative the authority of Peter, which in the canonical gospels seems notably absent from the proceedings. Although explicitly stressed in Matthew and implicitly affirmed in Mark, this apostle's presence in the passion seems downplayed and indeed eliminated altogether after his denial.

In general terms this accentuates and authorizes the narrative's more distinctive features – including, for example, some of the more impressively miraculous elements surrounding the resurrection. But more specifically we may also take account of the way in which the narrative voice associates Peter with a standpoint that is notably offset against *both* Jewish and Roman Imperial authority.

22 So most fully Augustin (2015) 279–82 and *passim*; cf. further Nicklas (2014) 35–47, Shoemaker (1999), and Tomson (2001) on anti-Jewish tendencies in other ancient Christian gospel-related apocrypha.

23 Cf. e.g. Bockmuehl (2012) 67–88, 131–41.

24 Although we cannot be certain about the origin of the title, it is explicitly used in the main surviving seventh-century MS from Akhmim. Prior to that one finds reference to a gospel in the name of Peter as early as Serapion of Antioch (c. 190: in Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 6.12.3–6), which may or may not be the same work. Further discussion and references in Bockmuehl (2017) 137–50.

Two passages may suffice to illustrate what I suspect could be established as a feature of the *Gospel of Peter* as a whole.

Section 26 illustrates an attitude of shock, grief, and fear of the Jewish authorities on the part of the disciples, here explicitly said to include Peter in the first person singular ('I and my friends'). Interestingly, although post-crucifixion 'fear of the Jews' is a motif also found in John's Gospel (19.38; 20.19), only the *Gospel of Peter* envisages an actual persecution of the disciples in connection with a specific threat to the Temple.

Most strikingly, Peter and the disciples are in this passage suspected of trying to *set fire* to the Jerusalem Temple (ἐμπρηῆσαι). This motif is patently absent from the New Testament and other Christian sources, but was of course distinctively associated with Vespasian's soldiers in the year 70.²⁵ Perhaps this is a subtle post-70 hint that the real enemies threatening the 'judgment' and 'the end of Jerusalem' (25) were not in fact the followers of Jesus?

Similar sentiments of fear towards Jewish authorities are expressed elsewhere in the text (e.g. 50, 52, 54). Mary Magdalene in particular is said to be afraid of 'the Jews' and even 'to be seen by the Jews' (perhaps again short for the elders and priests) 'because they were burning with anger' (50).

Section 46–50 once again highlight Pilate's assertion of innocence in the matter of Christ's death and places the blame squarely on the shoulders of those who agitated first for the execution and then for the guard at the tomb.

At the same time, however, Pilate appears here to have turned subtly but clearly into a rather more complex and problematic figure, who is by no means roundly exonerated. He clearly offends against his own better knowledge in order to satisfy the political expediency of protecting his Jewish henchmen.²⁶ To be sure, Matthew's compromised Pilate must in some sense stand in the background here (27.11–26). Yet the *Gospel of Peter* goes decidedly further in its distinctive theme of Pilate's active collusion with the Jewish leadership's demand for a cover-up. This seems in salient ways to qualify the earlier emphasis on Pilate's exoneration, request for burial, friendship with Joseph of

25 Josephus, *War* 6.165 (ἐμπρηῆσαντες). Even in the post-Constantinian period there is no substantive evidence of any Christian burning of pagan temples – although the destruction of pagan temples does feature repeatedly in later texts. A spontaneous destruction (not burning) of the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus in response to the preaching of St John already surfaces in the probably third-century *Acts of John* (38–44). This may be an early reflection of that Temple's destruction by fire on the part of Gothic warlords in the year 268, according to the sixth-century chronicler Jordanes (*Getica* 20.107: *Ephesiae Dianae templum ... igne succendunt*, 'they set on fire the temple of Ephesian Diana').

26 See Augustin (2015) 282–84; cf. Omerzu (2007).

Arimathia, etc. If that reading is correct, there is no straightforward political whitewash here.

The second-century *Gospel of Peter* represents an apologetic *relecture* and expansion of the Matthean passion narrative for a possibly Syrian Gentile readership under duress, for whom the gospel's *reinsertion* of Peter's authority as a witness of the passion and resurrection events provided comfort and reassurance.²⁷ In that respect our text falls some way short of this volume's interest in the later deployment of the apostle to legitimise change and innovation in existing as well as new power institutions, whether papal, aristocratic, or imperial.

3.2 *The Acts of Peter*

The late second-century *Acts of Peter* represents a rather different case in several important respects. Critical problems abound in any serious discussion of this puzzling, not to say infuriating, document that mixes the occasional pinch of collective memory with many a pound of wild fancy. The narrative perhaps originated in Rome and underwent subsequent extensive redaction and embellishment in the East, possibly in Asia Minor. Its Greek original survives only in the *Martyrdom* and in a small fragment from Oxyrhynchus (P.Oxy. 849). For present purposes I will treat the *Martyrdom* as essentially dating from the late second century in its content even if not its wording, while allowing that the stable text form of the more complete Latin Vercelli MS more likely dates from the fourth century.

The text highlights Paul's preaching at the start (1.2) and then majors on Peter's attempts to win the church of Rome back from its beguilement by the false prophet Simon Magus. In order to concentrate on the *Martyrdom* account we will here spend less time on the preceding series of paradoxical and exotic miracles: Peter's contest with Simon Magus is replete with such party pieces as a talking dog, a swimming smoked mackerel, the killing of a boy by Simon's word and his resuscitation by that of Peter, a flying contest and a good deal else. Finally a plot on Peter's life is revealed and the fellow believers urge him to leave the city. After initially rejecting the suggestion,²⁸ Peter leaves the city in disguise and famously sees Jesus entering Rome. He greets him with words that in their secondary Latin form have become legendary: 'Lord, where are you

27 Cf. my further comments in Bockmuehl (2017) 144–47.

28 Peter says, 'Shall we act like deserters, brothers?' (9.35.6 ed. Vouaux [1922]), as if reflecting on what the disciples did when Jesus was arrested.

going?”²⁹ When Jesus replies he is due to be crucified again, Peter turns back to the city to face crucifixion carried out upside down at his own request (37–38).

The *Acts of Peter* in one sense exemplifies the sort of approach to power I sketched in the first part of my paper. The *dramatis personae* are stylized and cartoon-like; dramatic spiritual combat against opponents is twinned with resistance and bold argument against unprincipled, cowardly and remarkably inarticulate official representatives of the imperial power of Nero (who is in the fourth-century Vercelli MS simply caricatured as ‘a wicked and bad man’: 1, *hominis impii et iniqui*).

Opposition to Jewish power has receded almost entirely. If Jewish ‘zeal’ played any part in the Neronian persecutions, the *Acts of Peter* knows nothing of it.³⁰ Indeed the only Jewish power that is resisted is the decidedly unorthodox Simon the magician, who is introduced as ‘a certain Jew named Simon’ despite the New Testament’s fairly clear presumption that he was a Samaritan (Acts 8.9). Underlining this Jewish reading of the conflict, the text repeatedly notes that Peter has previously clashed with Simon in Judaea (5, 17). But the apostle confronts no *other* Jews in the *Acts of Peter*, although the Gentile Christian senator Marcellus identifies the contest between Simon and Peter as between ‘two Jews’ (22).

Much more clearly and importantly, though, this is Peter in combat with the quintessential heresiarch and false prophet, protecting the church against his threats of sorcery and magic. And to be sure, the vehemence and violence of this conflict is stressed repeatedly – not least in the senator Marcellus’ shocking dream vision on the eve of the public contest, in which Peter beheads and cuts into pieces a demonic female figure representing the power of Simon Magus (22).³¹ It is not hard to imagine how this ‘proto-orthodox’ image of

29 The original Greek may intend ‘Lord, why have you come?’ or ‘why are you here?’ See Zwierlein (2009) 82–92 and *passim*, noting additional internal support for this reading in the wording of Jesus’ reply in the MS and in Origen. Vouaux (1922) reads Κύριε, ποῦ ᾤδε.

30 Such an allegation may possibly be hinted at in 1 *Clement*, cf. note 10 above: see further Bockmuehl (2012) 110–11.

31 Although necessarily disturbing to contemporary readers, it seems unlikely that the author would recognize any conflict between the destruction of an ‘Ethiopian’ female demon and the evident approval of women’s emancipation in this document. Both female gender and black appearance are commonplaces of ancient demonology, including Onoskelis in the *Testament of Solomon* (4.1–12) and the better attested Lilith, nocturnal queen of demons. Satan is ‘the Black One’ in the *Epistle of Barnabas* 4.9. St Antony was plagued by a black demon, while medieval texts sometimes describe the devil as Ethiopian in appearance. As is well known, the ancient shape of what we would call racism differed in significant respects from its modern equivalents, even if it cannot be straightforwardly reduced to prejudice based on culture and ethnicity rather than on

an all-star, swashbuckling apostle defending the church might in due course be deemed compatible with a re-appropriation of Peter in the service of an emerging moniscopacy, legitimating a new institution even if at this stage it has few means to exercise power except through preaching and charismatic signs. In a limited sense, then, Peter's role here may eventually turn out to be 'anchoring innovation' – especially as these texts are re-appropriated in the fourth century.

More significant, undoubtedly, is the apostolic position being articulated vis-à-vis the power of Rome. The disoriented and backsliding Roman church already appears to have attached to it a number of aristocratic members or sympathizers, above all the aforementioned senator Marcellus. This man has been captivated by Simon's magic and even turns out to be credited with a statue erected in his honour, apparently the one that Justin Martyr also misinterpreted in comparable terms. It was discovered in 1574 on the island in the Tiber, and shown to refer to an Etruscan deity.³² Marcellus returns to the faith in response to Peter's preaching and miracles, and helps advance Peter's cause.

In a dramatic and on any account highly symbolic episode (11), an exorcism destroys a large marble statue of Caesar in the courtyard of the reconverted senator's house. Peter criticizes the shell-shocked Marcellus for being more worried about the political trouble this might cause him than about the salvation of his soul; but the senator's clear expression of faith is nevertheless followed by the miraculous restoration of the statue. This complex story clearly plays at multiple levels, but Peter's political dialectic suggests at one and the same time a radical subversion of imperial power *and* Christianity's capacity to survive and thrive despite that power's continued existence. (A similar dialectic was already noted earlier in relation to canonical 1 Peter; in the next chapter Régis Burnet explores related themes for the Syrian Peter's role in marginal Christian groups.)

Once the contest with Simon Magus gets underway in earnest, it is staged consistently in the face of Roman public opinion and the agents of imperial power: the audience includes 'a multitude' of senators and prefects, aristocratic ladies as well as a wider Roman public. The prefect Agrippa himself proposes the contest and taunts Peter to take charge (23, 25, 26). Although at one level one might suspect here a fourth-century case of brashly hijacking Roman

physical characteristics like skin colour (so classically Puzzo (1964); contrast the key work of Isaac [2004]).

32 Here said to be dedicated to 'Simon the young god' (*Acts of Peter* 10). The correct inscription in fact was discovered in 1574 and found to read *Semoni Sanco Deo Fidio*. Justin (1 *Apol* 26) thought this read (and meant) *Simoni Deo Sancto*, i.e. 'to Simon the holy god'. Also cf. Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 2.13.3; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procat.* 6.14.

institutions on the side of Christian aspiration, perhaps a more moderate and realistic interpretation should see this in terms of the obstinate brashness under duress that also characterizes the polemic of apologists and martyrs' acts in much second and third-century literature.³³

This public political gambit may sometimes appear with an explicitly *eschatological* justification. Thus in the face of his impending death Peter declares himself obliged to convict a crowd of Roman senators and aristocratic ladies of their bewitched and darkened minds because of his concern about their fate in the judgment to come (28).

I will close this section with two brief illustrations from the *Martyrdom* account. The first pertains to the controversial effect of Peter's preaching in repeatedly recruiting aristocratic women to a life of celibacy and alienating them from their prominent husbands, who in turn resolve to destroy both them and Peter. This is reported in chapter 33 about the four concubines of the prefect Agrippa, a leading *dramatis persona*. Its most articulate statement occurs in relation to the wife of the emperor's friend Albinus in the next chapter (34).

The theme of female emancipation from pagan social structures, sometimes to controversial effect, is a well-known trope of early Christian literature, including several apocryphal Acts. Two small observations on this text may suffice for the present purpose. Let us note (1) the application of this motif to an aristocratic couple who are said to be close to the Emperor, and (2) its effect in causing a public disturbance (θόρυβος) in the imperial capital.

My second, fuller illustration involves a cluster of three texts concerning the interpretation of Peter's crucifixion, which is itself taken as manifesting resistance to Roman injustice. The first concerns the Christian response to Peter's death sentence (36), the second Peter's interpretation of his upside-down crucifixion by appeal to a saying of Jesus with parallels in other apocryphal literature (37–38),³⁴ and the third the divine rebuke of Nero's anger following the apostle's death (41).

The relevance of these texts in illustrating our topic seems fairly self-evident, although there is not time to discuss all three here. In chapter 36, the remarkable public objection to Agrippa's arbitrary miscarriage of justice is met by the equanimity of Peter's assurance that God is sovereign even in this, and that Agrippa's power is merely what might be expected of the imperial genome (his

33 While the trope of Christian martyrs' obstinacy and defiance (*contumacia*) is relatively well attested, attempts to locate in it the legal *cause* of persecution have not been widely followed but were subject to a lively debate between A. N. Sherwin-White and G. E. M. de Ste Croix in the pages of the journal *Past and Present*, 1963–64.

34 Cf. *Gospel of Thomas* 22; *Acts of Philip* 140.

πατρική ἐνέργεια). In chapter 41, Nero's irrational anger is divinely chastened so that the persecution subsides.

The upside-down crucifixion scene in chapters 37–38 merits one additional comment. Its symbolism is clearly of vital importance to the narrator. The dying but surprisingly loquacious Peter finds this to symbolize the demise of the fallen old Adam and the new Adam's subversion of all conventional human values: what natural man assumed to be ugly or inferior or unattractive, Christ has shown to be beautiful and good.³⁵ Like the nail in the middle of the cross, Peter suggests, this transvaluation of social convention suggests a call to repentance – a theme that could play equally well in the second century as in the fourth.

4 Concluding Observations

How should we interpret this remarkably ambiguous material? To support the script of a legitimization of power, one could attempt to filter the texts through the lens of James C. Scott's idea of 'hidden transcripts' of resistance, or adapt the ever-pliable theory of Pierre Bourdieu to envisage an endowment of Peter's leadership with capital that is at once spiritual and by extension political.³⁶

But the evidence in fact remains decidedly intractable and ambivalent, and its utility in the eye of the beholder. Is the *Gospel of Peter's* polemic a crudely ingratiating play on Graeco-Roman anti-Semitic prejudice, or does it attest a vulnerable Christian community finding in the gospel passion narrative solidarity vis-à-vis a Jewish majority leadership that was experienced as hostile and oppressive? And in the *Acts of Peter*, does Peter's struggle against Simon Magus and Nero's officials offer grassroots encouragement to a proto-orthodox community buffeted by external hostility and internal apostasy to persevere in its faith and way of life? Or does that conflict, on the contrary, signify and legitimate an emerging ecclesiastical hierarchy's forceful repression of religious minorities? One could go on.

Although academically fashionable and seductive, an over-theorized discourse of power is not a reliable friend to historical understanding. Too often it turns out to be a many-headed Hydra whose escape from its cage unleashes at least as many problems as it might at first conveniently promise to solve.

35 Cf. Bolyki (1998).

36 Scott (1985; 1990); Bourdieu (1986). The recently widespread assumption of covert anti-imperial scripts in early Christian texts has been usefully queried and probed by Heilig (2015).

Almost invariably it implicates the critic in a vicious circle of awkward questions about his or her *own* hermeneutical use of power, and the concerns which that in turn privileges or suppresses. That way lies a carousel of mirage and resentment, let alone more than a few derivative abuses of power.

Second-century traditions about a Petrine episcopal succession in Rome clearly did eventually go on to service inflated authoritarian claims to papal power. But it is remarkably difficult to instantiate this prior to Pope Leo I in the middle of the fifth century. Possible earlier exceptions, like Pope Victor arguing high-handedly with Polycrates in the second century and Pope Stephen with Cyprian in the third, seem to be precisely that: isolated and exceptional. Conversely, for the first four centuries the Roman church's literature, its liturgy and eventually even its architecture appeal for its apostolic foundation overwhelmingly not to a single Petrine pedigree but to the *twin* heritage of Peter and Paul (see Van den Hoek in this volume). This is clear even in the fourth-century form of the *Acts of Peter* (1–2) but perhaps more patently visible in monuments like the famous late fourth-century inscription of Pope Damasus at San Sebastiano (see Friedrichs and Thacker in this volume), or by implication in the early fifth-century founder's inscription at Santa Sabina (see the contribution by Noble).

Second-century apocryphal Gospels and Acts do not represent Peter as an apostolic prince and ruler. Nor is he one who seeks to co-opt Roman power or allow himself to be co-opted by it. The tendency to present Christianity as culturally, intellectually or politically *salonfähig* clearly begins to feature in some of the second and especially third-century apologists. But it rarely appears in the second-century Apocrypha, which almost invariably served a more grass-roots audience. Their function may well have been something rather more acutely felt than 'the Sunday afternoon literature of the ancient Church' as one of my Oxford predecessors liked to call them a century ago.³⁷ The sheer pastoral urgency of their concerns was too often overlooked in classic historicist treatments written mostly by tenured North Atlantic academics.³⁸

Second-century Christianity in general, and its apocryphal literature in particular, singled out Peter in order to identify itself with the apostolic gospel tradition in the face of perceived, and intermittently real, hostility from Romans and Jews. Connections and analogies with the New Testament events confirmed the meaning and significance of a new generation's experience of such enmity. The texts we have examined do not yet mobilize Peter in the service of

37 Turner (1920) 12. I now suspect I may have been insufficiently critical of this line in Bockmuehl (2017) 235.

38 This is a point rightly stressed in John Curran's contribution to the present volume.

legitimizing an exercise of power – whether for internal ecclesiastical ends or against Judaism, let alone for political power exercised explicitly or implicitly on the side of Empire. There is clearly a process of legitimation, but it is at this early stage the legitimation not of an institution but of a *community* – a minority experiencing at least perceived harassment and, at certain times and places, acute existential danger. There is undoubtedly a concern about power, too, but the explicit rhetoric of the *Acts of Peter* in particular cares consistently about the superior power of God and of Jesus rather than of Satan, Simon Magus or Caesar.³⁹

All this of course is not to deny that some of these texts did in time come to tolerate just such a narrative of inevitable Petrine triumph and the acquisition of papal power – *ex post facto* and in light of Constantinian climate change. But that is a topic for other contributions to this volume.

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39 So e.g. 2, 6, 15, 18, 25–28, 33; contrast 2, 4, 5, 8, 31–32, 36. Matters are less clear in the *Gospel of Peter*, though the cry of dereliction about the 'power' that has left Jesus does perhaps imply that this power is God's – and to be contrasted with the mob's celebration of the imagined 'power' they exercise over him (6, 19).

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