Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend

Bart D. Ehrman

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To the entire Beckwith Clan—

Jack, Barbara, Tommy, Mike, Simon, James, Julia, Peter,
Gill, Holly, Emily, and Charlie—

for welcoming me and letting me listen in

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Preface

The hardest part in writing a book about three such prominent figures of the past as Simon Peter, the apostle Paul, and Mary Magdalene is knowing what to leave out. So much could be said—especially where our evidence is so abundant, as in the cases of Peter and Paul, about whom very large books can be, and have been, written. I can't include everything here. For my friends in the field who think I could have done more, let me say that, well, I agree. For everyone else, let me say that I've tried to include the best bits.

I have written this book for the nonspecialist who is interested in these figures from early Christianity but doesn't know much about them. These three could in fact be considered the key players at the foundations of the most important historical, cultural, social, political, and, of course, religious institution of Western civilization—the Christian church. But not only are they historically significant, they are also endlessly fascinating.

Many readers may not know much about Peter, Paul, and Mary as historical figures—that is, what they actually said and did during their lives, both before and after the death of Jesus. But most readers will almost certainly not know the stories widely circulated about them in later times, the legends about Peter's spectacular miracles converting entire cities, Paul preaching that salvation comes only to those who refuse to have sex, or Mary setting sail in a rudderless boat, only to arrive in France, where she became the first missionary.

I would like to acknowledge several scholars who have selflessly read my manuscript and made helpful comments on it, in hopes that I would somehow make it as good as they might wish: Dale Martin, professor at Yale and one of the top scholars in the field, who has the dubious distinction of being my oldest friend in the business; Andrew Jacobs, from the University of California at

Riverside, a former student (though a Dukie) whose keen insights are sometimes beyond belief; Stephanie Cobb, from Hofstra University, another former student who has in these latter years developed a deft touch with her mean red pen; the anonymous and extraordinarily smart reader for Oxford University Press who pushed me hard and brought me kicking and screaming into important revisions; and my wife, Sarah Beckwith, a professor of English at Duke, who is an intellectual nonpareil and a person and partner extraordinaire. In addition, my talented editor and friend at Oxford University Press, Robert Miller, has read the manuscript, supported its progress through several stages, and discussed numerous related issues during long nights over fine wine. All authors should be so lucky.

Translations of the early Christian literature, including the New Testament, are my own, unless otherwise indicated; for the Hebrew Bible I have used the New Revised Standard Version.

Introduction

Even though this book is not about the folk-singing trio of the 1960s, Peter, Paul, and Mary, I'd like to begin by making reference to them and one of their best-known songs:

> If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning,
> I'd hammer in the evening all over this land;
> I'd hammer out danger, I'd hammer out a warning,
> I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters,
> All over this land.

Peter, Paul, and Mary burst onto the folk music scene in an apocalyptic moment in American history. In the early 1960s, the Cold War was heating up. Nuclear proliferation was moving apace on both sides of the Soviet-U.S. divide. Schoolchildren throughout the country were being drilled to hide under their desks if a nuclear bomb exploded over their cities. And the American involvement in the war in Vietnam was just starting—soon to become a real "apocalypse now," to use the term later coined for the Francis Ford Coppola film. On the home front, the civil rights movement was at its height, racial violence and desegregation were tearing apart communities, and it was not at all clear how the tensions would come to be resolved. It was a time of danger, a time of warning of worse yet to come, and a time to turn from war, hatred, and oppression to love, all over the land.

At the end of their popular song, after singing of a hammer, a bell, and a song, the trio unpacks their meaning:

> It's the hammer of justice, it's a bell of freedom,
> It's the song about love

> Between my brothers and my sisters,
> All over this land.©[1]

In the context of the 1960s, when hard social issues of poverty, oppression, racism, sexism—not to mention the international clashes of power and dominance—confronted us all, the folk singers pled for a return to the humane: justice, freedom, and love.

As it turns out, matters were not so different in the first Christian century in Roman Palestine. It too was a time of international political domination and imperialistic expansion, a time of class division, oppression, hatred, violence, and war.

Into that world there appeared the predecessors of our 1960s folk singers. These were prophets, who had a word from above addressing the ills of their world. One of them—far and away the best-known to us today—was Jesus of Nazareth. He also had a message of justice, freedom, and love. Like other Jews of his day, Jesus maintained that the evils of this world were caused by cosmic powers opposed to God and his people, who were wreaking havoc here on earth. These powers brought pain, misery, and suffering; they were responsible for wars, epidemics, droughts, famines, violence, oppression, and hatred. But their days were limited. Jesus believed that God was soon to reassert his power over this world and overthrow the forces of evil, to bring in a new kingdom on earth, a kingdom of God, in which there would be no more injustice, violence, pain, or suffering. God himself would rule supreme, and people would live the lives of paradise.

Jesus had numerous followers who adored him and committed themselves to his message. After his death, they took the message further afield, proclaiming that it was through Christ himself—now raised from the dead and exalted to heaven—that this future kingdom would be brought to earth. Three of these followers were named Peter, Paul, and Mary.

These three may well have been the most important of Jesus' followers: Simon Peter, his right-hand man during his public ministry, the leader of the twelve disciples; the Apostle Paul, the greatest missionary and theologian of the burgeoning Christian church after Jesus' death; and Mary Magdalene, his closest woman follower, the one who first recognized that he had been raised from the dead, and was therefore, arguably, the *first* Christian.

Peter, Paul, and Mary are significant not only because of who they actually were, as historical figures of the first century, but also because of how they were remembered in later centuries as legends sprang up about them, legends that were often assumed to be "gospel truth" by those who heard and told them. During the first three hundred years of Christianity—which will be my focus in this book—Peter was widely known as one who could do spectacular miracles leading to massive conversions to the faith. He was said to have the power to heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead. Some of the stories about him will strike modern readers as more than a bit bizarre—as when he

raises a smoked tuna fish from the dead in order to convince his onlookers of the power of God, or when he deprives a maleficent magician of his power of flight over the city of Rome, leading to the magician's crash landing and death. Paul as well had legends told about him as a great miracle worker whose handkerchiefs and aprons could be taken to the sick to restore them to health and who baptized a talking lion that later refused to devour him when he was thrown to the wild beasts in the arena. Paul in particular came to be known as a great advocate of asceticism, preaching that eternal life would come to those who abstained from the joys of sex, even if married. Modern readers may find it surprising that this message resonated among many ancients, some of whom abandoned their marriage bed in exchange for a more blessed existence in the hereafter. Mary Magdalene herself came to be known for her sex life—or at least for her previous sex life, as stories began to circulate that she had been a prostitute whom Jesus reformed and who then shared an unusually intimate relationship with him before his death. Later legend sent her to France as one of the first missionaries to western Europe.

None of these stories about Peter, Paul, and Mary is historically accurate. But that does not mean they are unimportant. The people who retold these stories—and those who heard them—believed them to be accurate portrayals of the past. What is more, they told these stories because they expressed so well their own beliefs, concerns, values, priorities, and passions. If we are interested not only in the lives of the original followers of Jesus but also in the lives of those who told stories about them in later times, there is no better place to turn than the stories circulating about Peter, Paul, and Mary.

Some scholars would argue that we ourselves are not so different from the storytellers of the ancient world—that when we recount what happened in the past, we too do so not merely to show what really happened but also because what happened is important to us today for our own lives. That is to say, at the end of the day, no one has a *purely* antiquarian interest, an interest in the past for its own sake. Instead, we are interested in the past because it can help us make sense of the present, of our own lives, our own beliefs, values, priorities, of our own world and our experience of it. If this view is right—and I happen to think it is—then, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a "disinterested" study of the past: all of us who study it are in fact interested in it for how it can help us think about ourselves and our lives.

This "interested" approach to the past was certainly the one taken by the ancient people who recounted the stories about Jesus' early followers. They told these stories not merely in order to convey objective facts about what had happened, but also because these stories *meant* something to them—whether the stories were, strictly speaking, historically accurate or not. Among other things, this means that modern historians have a two-pronged task. On one hand, we try to determine, to the best of our ability, what actually happened in the past: what did Peter, Paul, and Mary really say, do, and experience? At the same time, we explore how the past came to be remembered by people who

later talked about it and told stories about it—even when these stories were not historically accurate.

Somewhat ironically, it is often easier to know how the past was remembered than to decide what actually happened. Indeed, it is sometimes impossible to separate the legend from the history, the fabricated accounts from the historical events, despite our best efforts. The most unfortunate aspect of history is that it is gone forever. Once something happens, it is over and done with, and while there may be traces of past people and events, these traces are always incomplete, partial, slanted, vague, and subject to a range of interpretations. Historians do their best to reconstruct past events based on surviving evidence, but history is not an empirical science that can establish high levels of probability based on assured results obtained by repeated experimentation. History is as much art as science.

To a large extent this is because our sources of information are so problematic. Can we trust the ancient source that says that Peter raised a smoked tuna fish to life? How would we know? Another source indicates that his shadow could heal the sick when he passed by them on a sunny day. Is that true? Yet another source indicates that he raised a Roman senator from the dead by speaking a word in his ear. Did he really do so? Some of the stories of Peter's miracles are found in the writings of the New Testament, while others are found in books outside the New Testament. Does the historian accept what is found in Scripture as being historically accurate and what is found outside of it as inaccurate? On what grounds? We have a number of writings that claim to be Peter's: 1 and 2 Peter in the New Testament, the Gospel of Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter outside of it. Do we know whether he wrote any or all of these books? Or should we take seriously what the New Testament book of Acts says, that Peter was in fact illiterate and couldn't write at all?

These are just a few of the problems we face when trying to know what Peter was really like and what really happened during his life. Analogous problems attach themselves to Paul and Mary. Doing history is not an easy matter.

This is not to say that it is unimportant. On the contrary—speaking as a historian who does this for a living—knowing about the past matters. It matters whether the Khmer Rouge practiced genocide in Cambodia. It matters whether the experiment with communism in Eastern Europe succeeded. It matters whether weapons of mass destruction were discovered in Iraq.

And it matters whether Jesus actually existed and whether his followers did the things that our sources indicate they did. And so we should do our best to know what happened in the past—whether in the recent past with the destruction of New Orleans and the rather feeble efforts on the part of the government to deal with the crisis, in the slightly more distant past with our country's waffling over how to deal with crises in Rwanda or Bosnia, or in the far distant past with the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire or the rise of the Greeks—or the life of the historical Jesus.

At the same time, as I have been suggesting, history is not the only thing that matters, and separating history from legend is not the only interesting and important exercise that scholars perform on our surviving materials. For history is not simply a matter of separating the historical kernel (what *really* matters) from the legendary husk (what can be discarded). In part that's because, as I've indicated, the people who told and retold the stories—of New Orleans, of Rwanda, of Julius Caesar, of Jesus, or of Peter, Paul, and Mary—did not themselves often distinguish between historical fact and legendary imagination. Historical memories, later embellishments, legendary expansions, and pure fabrications were all told and retold because they related truths, beliefs, views, and ideas that Christians wanted to convey and to which they responded.

We should see what these truths, beliefs, views, and ideas were, by examining the stories that survive. And so our study of Peter, Paul, and Mary will consider both historical fact and legendary embellishment, together. We will ask what we can learn about these followers of Jesus as real, historical figures, what we can know about who they were, what they did, what they believed, what they taught, how they lived. At the same time we will ask about them as legendary figures who came to play such an important role in the imaginations of those who embraced the Christian religion, at its very foundations, before it became the religion of the Roman Empire and, eventually, the most important social, cultural, political, economic, and religious institution in the history of Western civilization.

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Part One

SIMON PETER

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Chapter One

The Quarry: Our Sources for Peter the Rock

Simon Peter is undoubtedly the best-known disciple of Jesus. But how well known is he, really? We know his name, Simon, and his nickname, allegedly given by Jesus himself, Cephas, which in the first century was not a name at all but a noun meaning "rock." The modern equivalent would be "Rocky." This at least was his nickname in Aramaic—the language that both Jesus and Simon spoke. In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for rock is *petra,* whence we get his more commonly known name, Peter. The name Simon Peter, then, literally means "Simon the Rock." Given Simon's impetuous and unfailingly fickle character during Jesus' lifetime, one almost wonders if Jesus was being ironic.

But back to our question: how well do we know Peter from our surviving sources? It is much to be regretted that we don't have anything like a full biography of him written by any of his contemporaries, even though a number of ancient accounts narrate what he allegedly said and did, both during Jesus' lifetime and afterward. One of the difficulties confronting historians is knowing which of these accounts, if any of them, can be trusted as historically accurate and which were colored by the legendary impulses prevalent among Christian storytellers of the first several centuries. The problem involves not only the legends found outside the canonical writings of the New Testament but even the stories that eventually came to be regarded by Christians as sacred Scripture.

Fact and Fiction in the Stories about Peter

In one of our early accounts of Peter's missionary activities after the death of Jesus, we find him in the Forum in Rome, trying to persuade the pagan (i.e.,

polytheistic) crowds to abandon their false gods and to believe in the power of Jesus, the only son of God. A woman appears on the scene completely distressed: her only son, her love and joy, has just died. Out of desperation, she appeals to Peter to raise him from the dead. Peter replies to her: "In the presence of these witnesses go and bring your son, that they may be able to see and believe that he was raised up by the power of God."[1] He sends a group of men to retrieve the corpse. They check to be sure the young man is dead and then bring him to Peter in the middle of the Forum. Peter says a brief prayer over the dead body and then commands, "Young man, arise and walk with your mother as long as you can be of use to her." And we are told that the "dead man rose immediately, and the multitude saw and were amazed, and the people cried, 'You, God the Savior, you, God of Peter, you are the invisible God and Savior.'" Peter's power is thus vindicated, God is glorified, and the masses convert to follow Christ.

But did this event really happen? As it turns out, it is found not in the New Testament but in a collection of writings known as the Acts of Peter, written some 150 years after Peter himself had passed from the scene. Is it actual history or a pious legend? Compare it to an account written somewhat earlier. In the town of Joppa, on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, a good Christian woman named Tabitha has recently died. The disciples are distressed and send for Peter to come and do something. Without delay he makes his way to town and ascends to the upper room where the body is laid out. Sending everyone out of the room, Peter kneels by the dead Tabitha and prays. He then says to her "Tabitha, rise." She opens her eyes and gives her hand to Peter, to the amazement of all in Joppa, many of whom come to believe in the power of Jesus as a result. Here is a story similar to the other, but this one is found in the New Testament (Acts 9:36–43). How can the historian claim that one of the stories is a fictional narrative and the other is a biographical fact? Is it enough to say that the author of Acts was recording historical events simply because church fathers living many, many years later decided to include his writings in the canon of Scripture?[2]

The resuscitation of dead bodies may not seem all that remarkable to readers of the New Testament. To be sure, we don't see this kind of thing happen every day, but it does seem to happen in the Bible. Other miraculous events, though, while no less impossible in a literal sense, may strike us as a bit more peculiar and subject to doubt. Consider the episode of Peter and the smoked tuna fish. Peter is back in Rome, trying to convince the crowds that his God is all-powerful and deserves to be worshiped. They ask him for a miracle to prove his point, and he notices a smoked tuna hanging in the window of a fishmonger's shop. He takes hold of the fish and asks the crowd, "When you see this swimming in the water like a fish, will you be able to believe in him whom I preach?" They all answer in one voice, "Indeed we shall believe you." And so he says the magic words: "In your name, O Jesus, Christ, in whom they do not yet believe, I say, 'Tuna, in the presence of all these, live and swim like a fish.'"

And the fish immediately comes back to life—not just for an hour or so, but for good, as people see when they stay and feed it bits of bread. This display of divine power has then a spectacular result: "very many who had witnessed this followed Peter and believed in the Lord."

This is a rather strange moment in the life of Peter—and again, one found not in Scripture but in the second-century Acts of Peter. But there are strange events in the New Testament as well. In one passage of the book of Acts, we are told that Peter is so powerful that he no longer even needs to touch the sick or demon-possessed to heal them. If he passes by on a sunny day, his shadow cures them (Acts 5:15–16).

Or consider another pair of stories. In the New Testament, Peter speaks in the name of God to Ananias, a man who has withheld money from the apostolic trust fund. As a result of Peter's intervention, Ananias (and later his equally culpable wife) falls down dead, to the amazement of the crowds. Outside the New Testament, Peter speaks in the name of God to Simon Magus, a magician who tries to prove that he represents the truth of God by flying like a bird over the hills and temples of Rome. As a result of Peter's intervention, Simon is deprived of his ability of flight, crashes to the earth, breaks his leg in three places, and eventually dies. This too, sensibly, amazes the crowd. On what grounds can we say that one of the stories is fact and the other fiction?

We can broaden the question to include the words of Jesus that Peter, his closest disciple, is alleged to have heard. In one account we are told that Jesus was seated on the Mount of Olives teaching his disciples about what would happen at the end of time. When Peter asks him for more details, Jesus launches into a long exposition of what could be expected for nonbelievers on the day of judgment, and appears actually to show Peter the realm of the damned. The graphic and lurid images that appear in the account clearly make their point: those who habitually practice sin will be condemned to severe and painful suffering in the afterlife, and to some extent their punishments will match their crimes. So women who braid their hair to make themselves attractive to their illicit lovers will be hanged by their hair for all eternity, and the men who have had illicit sex with them will be hanged by their genitals over fire. As one might expect, these men lament, "We did not know that we should come to everlasting punishment!" Those who revel in their riches will be clad in rags and filthy garments and cast for all eternity upon a stone topped with a pillar of fire that is "sharper than swords." Those who have lent money out at interest (usury) will spend eternity in a pit with filth up to their knees. And so it goes.

This narrative can be found in a book called the Apocalypse of Peter, which was considered Scripture by many Christian leaders for centuries before the canon was finally agreed upon, but which, obviously, did not finally come to be included in the New Testament. No less striking, however, is the account found within the Christian New Testament, where Jesus is recorded as saying to Peter (and James and John) that "before this generation passes away" (Mark 13:30) the entire universe will fall apart: "the sun will be darkened, and the

moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13:25–26). If people can see the Son of Man coming, that might be the greatest miracle of all, since there will no longer be any sun, moon, or stars.

More could be said about the amazing stories surrounding Peter both within the canon of Scripture and outside it, but this is enough to make my basic point. Most readers of the noncanonical accounts will have no trouble realizing that they are filled with legendary reports about the things Peter said, heard, did, and experienced. These reports are often based on pious legends, as storytellers among the Christians wanted to celebrate the life of this chief disciple of Jesus. But the legend-making tendencies did not start only after the canon of the New Testament had been completed. Quite the contrary, there are legendary materials within the books that Christians eventually came to call sacred Scripture. It is not the case that the New Testament presents us only with facts and the books outside the New Testament present us only with pious fictions. There are facts and fictions in all our books, both inside the Bible and outside of it. And in many cases it is difficult—one might say well nigh impossible—to separate one from the other.

And maybe that's not the most important task in any event. Both kinds of story, the historically accurate and the highly legendary, were told and retold by Christian storytellers and authors for *reasons,* and often for precisely the same reasons. We need to realize that the people telling the stories about Peter (as well as Paul, Mary, and even Jesus) were not interested simply in providing history lessons, objectively verifiable reports for students needing to learn about history "as it really was." Christian storytellers had an entirely different range of purposes. They wanted to explain, illustrate, explore, and embody important Christian beliefs, perspectives, worldviews, ideas, biases, purposes, practices, and so on.

So, given the nature of the material, possibly the most important task is not the rather dry academic exercise of separating history from legend but rather to understand what the stories were trying to accomplish on their own terms, that is, to see what the storytellers wanted to achieve by telling the stories the ways that they did.

Sources for Peter: The Unusual Case of the Gospel of Mark

Before exploring this matter further, I need to point out that some scholars have argued that despite all the foregoing, there is at least one ancient source that gives a historically accurate account of what happened in Peter's life during the years of Jesus' ministry. This source is allegedly based on a firsthand account (Peter's own) and is none other than the Gospel of Mark.

The Gospel of Mark is our earliest surviving Gospel. Most scholars today think that it was written sometime around 65 or 70 CE, about thirty-five to forty years after Jesus' death.[3] But how did Mark get his information about Jesus? The early church tradition is that Mark was not himself a disciple of Jesus (and was not, therefore, an eyewitness to the events he narrates) but was a personal secretary of sorts for the chief disciple, Simon Peter. This tradition can be traced back to the writings of an otherwise little-known church father of the early second century named Papias, bishop of the city of Hieropolis in Asia Minor (modern Turkey).

The Witness of Papias

Papias was the author of a five-volume work called *An Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord.* To our knowledge, this was the first attempt to interpret the sayings of Jesus in writing. It is difficult to know much about the character of these lengthy interpretations. We do not know, for example, whether Papias was interested only in the teachings of Jesus or if he also discussed the various things that Jesus did and experienced. The reason we don't know is that the work has almost completely disappeared. Christians of the early centuries who read Papias's *Exposition* were not altogether impressed by it and either suppressed it or, at least, did not bother to copy it for posterity. No copy survives today. The only reason we know anything at all about it is that several later church writers quoted it on occasion. That these church writers were more impressed by the fact that Papias had written the book than by what he actually says in it is evident in some of the remarks that they make. Most notably, an important author of the early fourth century, Eusebius, sometimes known as the "father of church history" because he wrote the first account of the history of Christianity's early centuries, read the work (or perhaps only parts) and concluded that "Papias was a man of very small intelligence" (*Church History,* 3, 39, 13).

Still, it is a great pity that Papias's work does not survive in its entirety, for the bits that do survive are of enormous historical interest. In part this is because Papias indicates how he acquired his information about Jesus and his teachings. In one of the quotations that Eusebius gives from the *Expositions,* Papias states that his preferred method of research was not to read what others had written about Jesus (e.g., the Gospels) but to converse with Christian leaders who had been acquainted with one or more of Jesus' own apostles:

> But whenever someone arrived who had been a companion of one of the elders, I would carefully inquire after their words, what Andrew or Peter had said, or what Philip or what Thomas had said, or James or John or Matthew or any of the other disciples of the Lord.[4]

And so, even though Papias was not himself an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus nor a companion of any of Jesus' disciples, he did come to know people acquainted with the disciples and received valuable information from

them. This information served as the basis of his five-volume exposition of Jesus' teachings.

The reason this matters for our purposes here is that one of the few surviving quotations from Papias's work provides a reference to the authorship of and authority behind Mark's Gospel. At one point Papias says:

> And this is what the elder used to say, "When Mark was the interpreter of Peter, he wrote down accurately everything that he recalled of the Lord's words and deeds—but not in order. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him; but later, as I indicated, he accompanied Peter, who used to adapt his teachings for the needs at hand, not arranging, as it were, an orderly composition of the Lord's sayings. And so Mark did nothing wrong by writing some of the matters as he remembered them. For he was intent on just one purpose: to leave out nothing that he heard or to include any falsehood among them." (Fragment 3, 15)

On the basis of this quotation, some scholars have maintained that in the Gospel of Mark, we actually have a highly accurate account of Peter's understanding of Jesus—and, of course, of the things that Peter himself said and did. It is argued that Mark's Gospel is based on the eyewitness report of Peter, as Papias himself faithfully records.[5]

Some of the Problems with Papias's Witness

Historians' lives would be so much easier if this were, in fact, such an open-and-shut case. But unfortunately, there are problems with taking Papias's statement at face value and assuming that in Mark's Gospel we have a historically reliable account of the activities of Peter. To begin with, some elements of Papias's statement simply aren't plausible. When he says that Mark wrote down "everything" that Peter recalled about Jesus' words and deeds, can he really mean it? Our Gospel of Mark is not a large book—just over twenty pages in the English Bible sitting on my desk. It takes probably a couple of hours to read, from start to finish. Are we to imagine that the apostle Peter, who was with Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry to his crucifixion, remembered only enough stories about what Jesus said, did, and experienced to take up a two-hour narrative? Surely if he spent months with Jesus, let alone years, he could talk about him for days on end. The Gospel of Mark can't be a collection of everything Peter would have remembered.

But is Papias even referring to the Gospel of Mark that we now have in our New Testament? It might be natural to assume that he is, but it is important to note several intriguing facts. The first is that our Gospel of Mark was not originally entitled "The Gospel according to Mark." As is true of our other New Testament Gospels, this one was written anonymously. Our author never tells us who he is. The title of the book was added later (we don't know how much later) by scribes who were copying the book and wanted their readers to know what authority the account was based upon.[6] For this reason, there is no guarantee that the book Papias mentions is the book that we call Mark.

Second, consider the one other Gospel that Papias mentions: the Gospel of Matthew (he doesn't discuss Luke or John). This is what he says about it: "Matthew composed the sayings in the Hebrew tongue, and each one interpreted them to the best of his ability." Again, one might uncritically assume that he is referring to the Gospel that we call Matthew. But is he? The two things he says about this book are that it contained (only) sayings of Jesus and that it was written in Hebrew. But our Gospel of Matthew contains much more than sayings, as it also gives an account of Jesus' activities, miracles, death, and resurrection. And it was written not in Hebrew but in Greek.[7] Papias appears to be thinking of some book other than our Gospel of Matthew. When he refers to Mark, then, is he referring to our Mark? Since he never quotes any of the passages of the Gospel, it is hard to say.

There's an even bigger problem with taking Papias at his word when he indicates that Mark's Gospel is based on an eyewitness report of Peter: virtually everything else that Papias says is widely, and rightly, discounted by scholars as pious imagination rather than historical fact. This is one of those interesting instances in which scholars who want certain comments to be factual accept them as fact, even when there are other comments they are willing and eager to admit are fictitious. In other words, it is a case of selective preference—preferring to regard as fact what one wants to be fact, and discounting everything else.

Consider a couple of the other well-attested comments of Papias, which no one credits as factually accurate. In one place in his *Expositions* he mentions a tradition allegedly received from John, the disciple of Jesus, about what Jesus taught about the future millennium on earth:

> The days are coming when vines will come forth, each with ten thousand boughs; and on a single bough will be ten thousand branches. And indeed, on a single branch will be ten thousand shoots and on every shoot ten thousand clusters; and in every cluster will be ten thousand grapes, and every grape, when pressed, will yield twenty-five measures of wine. And when any of the saints grabs hold of a cluster, another will cry out, "I am better, take me, bless the Lord through me." So too a grain of wheat will produce ten thousand heads and every head will have ten thousand grains and every grain will yield ten pounds of pure exceptionally fine flour. So too the remaining fruits and seeds and vegetation will produce in similar proportions. (Fragment 1, 3)

No one thinks this is a teaching that John actually passed along from Jesus; it is a fantastic (and terrific) expectation of a utopian kingdom on earth—intriguing and attractive, but not historically accurate as a description of Jesus' words.

Or consider the rather lurid description of the death of Judas, who, according to Papias, did not "hang himself," as found in Matthew 27:5, but experienced the torment of girth until he literally burst open (more along the lines of Acts 1:18):

> But Judas [after the betrayal] went about in this world as a great model of impiety. He became so bloated in the flesh that he could not pass through a place that was

> easily wide enough for a wagon—not even his swollen head could fit. They say that his eyelids swelled to such an extent that he could not see the light at all; and a doctor could not see his eyes even with an optical device, so deeply sunken they were in the surrounding flesh. And his genitals became more disgusting and larger than anyone's; simply by relieving himself, to his wanton shame, he emitted pus and worms that flowed through his entire body. And they say that after he suffered numerous torments and punishments, he died on his own land, and that land has been, until now, desolate and uninhabited because of the stench. Indeed, even to this day no one can pass by the place without holding his nose. This was how great an outpouring he made from his flesh on the ground. (Fragment 4)

Papias was obviously given to flights of fancy. Why do scholars trust him when he says that Peter was the source of Mark's Gospel? It is only because they *want* to trust him in this instance—even though they know full well that when he gives other pieces of "historical" information he is in fact passing on pious fictions.[8]

The Nature of Our Surviving Sources

As I have already intimated, it is important to recognize the nature of our surviving Christian texts, Mark and all the others, when trying to investigate them as sources for what actually happened in history. The narratives that we have—for example, the Gospels and Acts—probably do contain some historical recollections of things that actually happened in the life of Peter (and of Mary, and of Jesus, etc.). But they also contain historically inaccurate statements, many of which are made for the same reasons that the more accurate ones are made: not in order to provide us with history lessons about life in first-century Roman Palestine, but in order to advance important Christian points of view. This is neither a good thing nor a bad one. It is not as if someone could have written a completely "objective" account of things that happened, even if she wanted to do so. Anything that happens has to be observed before it can be described. And the person observing and describing it will always have beliefs, perspectives, worldviews, loves, hates, likes, dislikes, biases, tendencies, and a range of other things that make humans human. All these human traits necessarily affect how we observe what happens in our world, what we choose to describe about it, and how we go about doing so. This is true not just of the writers of early Christian literature but of all of us, all of the time. As a consequence, historians who want to know what really happened in the past always have to take this element of subjectivity into account.

This is especially true of the early Christian Gospels, which were never *intended* to be disinterested descriptions of historical data. They are, after all, called "Gospels," which means something like "the proclamation of good news." Whoever wrote these books meant to show that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus brought salvation—that is, they had a theological agenda. These books are not "objective" descriptions of what Jesus said and did.

This can be seen by approaching the Gospels in a new way. Most people who are serious about reading the Gospels (and there seem to be fewer and fewer such people) read them in a way that I would call "vertically." That is to say, they start with Matthew and read it from the top of the page to the bottom, from beginning to end. Then they read Mark from beginning to end. Mark sure sounds like Matthew: a lot of the same stories, many of them in the same sequence, often in the same exact words. Then they read Luke, beginning to end, and they have the same sense of things. It's basically the same story, with some new material thrown in. John, to be sure, is different, but when read vertically (top to bottom) it doesn't seem all *that* different.

This, of course, is the way we normally read books. But there is another way to read the Gospels: horizontally. A horizontal reading does not focus on the similarities among them but instead highlights their differences. It involves reading a story in one of the Gospels, and then reading the same story in another one of them, and then the same story in a third. It's like having them laid out on the page in three (or four, if you count John) columns, and you read across the columns instead of top to bottom. When you do that, you start seeing differences among the Gospels. Sometimes these are small differences that are impossible to reconcile (even if the stories are basically the same). Sometimes they are bigger differences that might actually matter to the sense of the story. And sometimes they are enormous differences with real consequences for interpretation.

Let me give some examples that affect our understanding of the life of Peter, just to make the point.

1. In Mark's Gospel one of Jesus' early miracles is to heal Peter's mother-in-law of a fever (which allows her to get up and make dinner for him and his hungry disciples) (Mark 1:30–31). This happens well before Jesus gets a cool reception in his own hometown of Nazareth after the sermon he preaches there, weeks or months later (Mark 6:1–6). In Luke's Gospel Jesus performs the same miracle for Peter's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38–39), but now it is almost immediately *after* his sermon in Nazareth (4:16–30)—before Jesus' activities described in Mark chapters 2–5, instead of after them. Maybe the difference isn't all that important. But if you want to write a biography of Peter, isn't it important to know what happened when?
2. Another chronological problem comes at the end of Jesus' ministry. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus holds a last supper with Peter and the other disciples during the Jewish feast of Passover (14:12). In John's Gospel, however, the supper takes place the day *before* Passover (John 19:14). Which is it? Here the chronology matters: is the Lord's Supper in the Christian tradition supposed to be related to the Jewish Passover seder (perhaps as a "replacement"), or is it unconnected to it?

3. How (and when) is Peter called to be a disciple? Does Jesus call him while he's fishing, telling him to put up the net and follow him, at the very outset of his ministry, as in Mark (1:16–17)? Or does the call come after Jesus has done some miracles (including the healing of Simon's mother-in-law), after Simon and his partners have made a miraculous catch of fish, as in Luke (5:1–11)? Or does Peter find Jesus (instead of the other way around) at his brother Andrew's urging, when there are no fish involved, as in John (1:38–41)?
4. When does Peter recognize that Jesus is the messiah? Is it halfway through the ministry, as in Mark (8:29)? Or is it at the very beginning, as in John (1:41–42)?

Examples of this kind can be multiplied all day long. All you need to do is read the Gospels horizontally, and you'll find plenty of them yourself. And so I have my students do an exercise: I assign a key narrative, such as the accounts of Jesus' resurrection, and ask them to compare all of the Gospel accounts carefully. Who goes to Jesus' tomb the day after the Sabbath? How many women are there? What do they see there? Who meets them there—an angel, a man, or two men? What are they told there? What do they do once they're told? And so on. The same can be done with Peter's role at the resurrection. Is he the first to see Jesus, or is Mary Magdalene? What does he do at the tomb? Whom does he believe? Whom does he disbelieve? Read the accounts for yourself and you'll see the problems. These are not historical narratives of what actually took place. They *can't* be—they disagree far too often to be that.

The same exercise works with the book of Acts, in which Peter also features prominently (at least in chapters 1–12). In this case we do not have a *second* account of the early life of the church to compare and contrast with Acts (i.e., that can be read horizontally with it): Acts is the only book of its kind in the New Testament. But one of the key figures in Acts is the apostle Paul, and it is possible to compare what Paul says about his relationship with Peter with what Acts says about Paul's relationship with Peter. Look carefully at the different accounts and you'll find important differences. When did Peter and the other apostles meet Paul: right after Paul's conversion in Damascus, as in Acts, or years later, as Paul insists (Acts 9:26–29; Gal. 1:16–18)? Did Peter start the mission to the Gentiles, as in Acts, or did he restrict his mission to the Jews while Paul was the missionary to the Gentiles, as in Paul's own letters (Acts 10–11; Gal 1–2)? Did Peter agree with Paul's understanding that Gentiles should not be urged to keep the Jewish law, as in Acts, or did he disagree, as according to Paul (Acts 15:6–11; Gal. 2:11–15)?

Some readers over the years, of course, have tried to reconcile all of these differences. And if you are willing to do enough fancy interpretive footwork, you can interpret just about *anything* in a way that irons out all the problems. When I was in college, for example, I found a book called *The Life of Christ in*

Stereo, which took the four Gospels and smashed them all together into one big Gospel in which all the discrepancies were reconciled. And so what did the author do, for example, when Matthew indicates that Peter denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed but Mark indicates that Peter denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed twice? Very simple: Peter must have denied Jesus *six* times, three times before the cock crowed and three times before it crowed again.[9]

The problem with this kind of interpretation is that, at the end of the day, it is nothing other than an attempt to write an entirely new Gospel, one that is completely unlike any of the four in the New Testament. There may be advantages to doing this—anyone can have the Gospel that he or she wants, produced by his or her own hands. But it's probably not the best way to go if we want to understand the Gospels and Acts in light of their own (as opposed to our) teaching.

Conclusion: History and Legend in the Stories of Peter

As I said in the Introduction, it is important to know what happened in the past. But there are times when we simply can't know what happened. With respect to Peter, there are some things that we can say with relative certainty, as we will see in later chapters: he probably was an Aramaic-speaking fisherman from Galilee, for example. There are other things that are almost certainly legendary accretions created by Christian storytellers who talked about his life and activities: he probably did not, for example, make a smoked tuna come back to life in order to convert the crowds in Rome. And there are yet other events that are possibly historical but harder to establish: Did he preach to a crowd of Jews in Jerusalem two months after Jesus' death, leading to some conversions? Was he the first bishop in Antioch of Syria? Or in Rome? Did he die by crucifixion during the reign of the Emperor Nero?

Whether historically accurate or not, however, there are a large number of stories told about Peter. These stories are worth our attention, not simply to inform us concerning what actually happened in his life but also to help us see what was happening in the lives of the people who told the stories. For these stories functioned in important ways for the Christian storytellers who told and retold them, as the stories helped them express their own beliefs, perspectives, loves, hates, fears, and understandings—not just about Peter but also about themselves and their relationship to both God and the world in which they lived.

Chapter Two

Peter: Solid Rock or Shifting Sand?

We can begin our study of Simon Peter by considering something about his personal character. The stories of the New Testament regularly portray him as fickle and impetuous, the last person you'd expect to be called the Rock. Yet the consistent testimony of the Gospels is that Jesus himself provided the nickname. When did this happen, and how apt a description, really, is it?

Peter's Nickname

As happens so often, the Gospels appear to disagree on when Jesus bestowed the name Peter (Rocky) on Simon. The first Gospel to be written was probably Mark, dated by most scholars to around 65 or 70 CE, that is, about thirty-five or forty years after the events it narrates. Here, in virtually his first public act, Jesus calls Andrew and his brother Simon from their fishing business to be his followers. The brothers live in Capernaum, a small fishing village on the sea of Galilee. Soon after they meet Jesus one of his first miracles involves healing Simon's mother-in-law, in bed with a fever that has kept her from preparing the evening meal (1:29–31). Jesus proceeds to engage in his ministry of healing and casting out of demons, acquiring followers, and disputing aspects of Jewish law with his opponents, the Pharisees, for a couple of chapters. It is not until chapter 3 that he chooses twelve followers to be his closest disciples—an inside circle, as it were. Here we are told that he chooses Simon first and gives him the surname Peter (3:16; this agrees with Luke's version of the story, Luke 6:14). One would assume that the renaming happened at this point, after Jesus had gotten to know Simon a bit.