

1 Peter 1:1

Introduction

Over the last two weeks, we've traced the life of Peter in the Gospels, and then in the book of Acts. "Peter, the Apostle – the Unlikely 'Rock'" in the Gospels and then "Peter, the Apostle – a Man Transformed" in Acts. It's this Peter that we've come to "know" over the past weeks who wrote the two epistles in our Bibles that we call 1st and 2nd Peter. But when did he write them? And from where? And to whom? And why? If, in the past two weeks, we've come to "know" Peter, my hope this week is that we'll come to see that the Christians to whom Peter is writing are just as "real" as Peter himself.

I. Peter's Early Ministry – Jerusalem

We saw in the book of Acts that early on, Peter was very prominent in the leadership of the church in Jerusalem (probably for about 12 years from Jesus' ascension all the way until Peter's arrest by Herod; A.D. 30-42). In the first eleven chapters of Acts, we see far more of Peter than any other Apostle, or any other person at all. At the very end of chapter eleven, we see Barnabas and Saul traveling from Antioch to Jerusalem with a contribution for the brothers who were suffering from a famine in Judea. This is probably the visit that Paul refers to in Galatians chapter two when he says that he went up to Jerusalem and met privately with those who were reputed to be pillars in the Jerusalem church: James and Cephas (Peter) and John. (Gal. 2:1-10; cf. 1:18-19) So, at least until chapter 11, Peter appears to have been very prominent and active as a leader in the Jerusalem church.

II. Peter Leaves Jerusalem

But then, in Acts chapter 12, Herod has Peter imprisoned, intending to put him to death. The night before Peter's scheduled execution, an angel released him from his prison, after which Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where the church was praying for him. Peter described to them how the Lord had let him out of the prison, and then he said: "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." (cf. Acts 12:17) Why couldn't Peter report these things to James himself? Remember, Peter and James were partners in the leadership of the Jerusalem church. Well, apparently, Peter was planning to leave Jerusalem immediately – that's why he wouldn't be reporting to James. So all we're told in Acts chapter twelve is that Peter "left and went to another place" – somewhere around A.D. 42. (Acts 12:12-17) What other place?

The next time—and the last time—that we have any definite record of Peter's activities is 5-6 years later when we find Peter back in Jerusalem for a church counsel. But even at this church counsel, it seems that James alone is now the recognized apostolic leader of the Jerusalem church. (Acts 15:13-21; cf. 21:18) So where was Peter in the eight years between his deliverance from prison and the Jerusalem church counsel? And where did Peter go after the Jerusalem counsel, and how did he spend the rest of his life? One question we especially have is when did Peter write the two letters that we have in our Bibles? From **where** did he write them, and to **whom** did he write them, and **why**?

III. Peter writes a letter to Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia

- 1 Peter 1:1 — Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the chosen, who are foreigners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...

So right at the very beginning, Peter tells us where his letter will be going. [MAP] This letter is an “encyclical” letter, so it’s not addressed to the church in a single city or province as many of Paul’s letters are, but to all the believers and churches scattered throughout a massive area covering approximately 130,000 square miles of what is today Turkey.

So the first question we might have is how did these churches come to be there, and what is Peter’s relationship to the Christians in these churches. Why is Peter writing to these churches in particular? We know that the Apostle Paul was responsible for planting a whole lot of churches, but these were all far to the south. (cf. Acts 16:7) [MAP] The provinces to which Peter writes mostly cover territory that Paul never worked in. So how has the Gospel spread over such a vast area in no more than 30-35 years since the death and resurrection of Jesus? I’m reminded of the words of Jesus to Peter:

- Matthew 16:18 — I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

The church is a miracle – that without weapons or warfare, it should spread as it has throughout all the world, and still be spreading and conquering today! This is nothing less than the evidence that Jesus is doing today as He told us He would before He ascended to the Father. We can look back today over 2000 years of church history—of Christ building His church, but when Peter wrote, the history of Christ building His church was no more than 35 years – shorter than the lifetime of Peter himself! And yet look how miraculously the Gospel has already spread across the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. But again, how did the Gospel come there if not by the Apostle Paul?

Well, what about Peter? Is it possible that during the years that we hear nothing at all about Peter, he was travelling through these northern provinces proclaiming the Gospel and establishing churches while Paul was doing the same thing in the southern provinces? It is possible, but it doesn’t seem likely. For one thing, there’s absolutely no hint from history, from tradition, or from the Scriptures that the Apostle Peter ever worked in these areas or that his name was ever associated with the founding of these churches. But if Peter had evangelized these areas, we might expect that fact to be remembered somewhere. And look what Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:12 –

- 1 Peter 1:12 — It was revealed to [the prophets] that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you **through those who preached the good news to you.**

It would seem, then, that Peter is *not* the one who preached the good news to these believers in northern Asia Minor – or at the very least not to the majority of them. But if this is the case, then why is *Peter* the one writing to them, and how did these believers first come to hear the Gospel and believe?

In Acts chapter two, Luke describes what happened on the day of Pentecost, when Peter preached his first evangelistic sermon:

- Acts 2:5–9 — Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together... And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "...how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and **Cappadocia**, **Pontus** and **Asia**...?"

Is it possible that some of the visitors from Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia were converted by Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost and then returned to their homes where they preached and spread the Gospel themselves? It's very possible. I think it's almost certain that this happened. This is one of the miracles of Pentecost – that the Gospel should be proclaimed for the very first time on a day that God had prepared 15 hundred years earlier when He called His people to observe the Feast of Weeks—the Feast of Pentecost—at the temple **in Jerusalem**. So *now*, the people who have been scattered throughout all the world just "happen" to be in Jerusalem at just the right time to hear the very first preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Here, again, we see the wonderful sovereignty and goodness of God as Jesus begins the work of building His church. But even this wonderful miracle doesn't seem to fully explain the existence of the church across such a vast area of Asia Minor. And we might still wonder why it's the Apostle Peter, in particular, who's writing to these believers probably some 33 years later.

Is it possible that the Gospel gradually spread to the north from the churches that Paul planted in the south? [MAP] Or is it possible that there were some other unknown traveling evangelists who came to these provinces early on? All of these are very likely explanations for how the Gospel came to the five provinces of northern Asia Minor, but there might be yet another explanation, and it might help us to understand better why it's the Apostle Peter who's writing to these Christians.

Let's try to paint a little picture of these provinces to which Peter is writing. As the mighty Roman Empire spread and conquered, it annexed to itself more and more territory. [MAP] Of course, we have to remember that the people living in these territories were not Romans, but different ethnic peoples native to their own lands. So the first of these five provinces to be annexed to Rome was the province of Asia. Because it was the closest to Rome and Greece and because it was on the coast of the Aegean Sea, Asia was more urban (at least 42 cities) and more Hellenized (Greek speaking and sophisticated) than all the rest of the provinces in Asia Minor. But what happened as you moved further west? When it comes to northern Galatia and Bithynia and Pontus and Cappadocia, one commentator writes:

"The picture that emerges of the regions to which Peter wrote is one of a vast geographical area with small cities few and far between, of a diversified population of indigenous peoples [natives], Greek settlers, and Roman colonists. The residents practiced many religions, spoke several languages, and were never fully assimilated into the Greco-Roman culture." (Jobes)

Another commentator says that: “The outstanding feature of the geographical destination of 1 Peter ‘is the enormous diversity of the land, peoples, and cultures.’” (Elliott, quoted in Jobes) This seems to be a very different picture from the cities and provinces through which Paul traveled in the south. (Cilicia, southern Galatia, Pamphylia, south and west Asia)

So how is it that we find the Apostle Peter, **no more** than 35 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, writing a letter to established churches spread all across such a vast and diverse, and relatively remote and uncivilized area as northern Asia Minor? “To the chosen, who are foreigners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...”

Well, how did the Roman empire annex new territories after conquering them? Did it just draw a new line on the map and call it done? * No! These new provinces had to be “Romanized,” and the way to do this was to found Roman colonies where Roman culture and language and politics could be introduced to the native populations. Claudius was the emperor of Rome for thirteen years, beginning right about the same time that Peter “went to another place” after he was arrested by Herod and then set free by the angel. And it just so happens that Claudius—and maybe *only Claudius*—established colonies in all five of the provinces that Peter mentions in the beginning of his letter – in Pontus, in Galatia, in Cappadocia, in Asia, and in Bithynia.

But how did a Roman Emperor go about **populating** new Roman colonies in these far distant lands? Who was supposed to go live in these new centers for Roman civilization? Some people went willingly, because it might provide opportunities for wealth and influence that they might never have at home. But many people were also forced to relocate to these new colonies against their will.

“It was not uncommon for the emperor or senate to deport a group viewed to be troublemakers in Rome to colonize a newly acquired territory in some remote area of the empire. Expulsion of noncitizens from urban areas was a common occurrence throughout Roman history... At times, whole populations were forced to emigrate because they were perceived as disruptive of the *pax Romana*, or because the emperor had confiscated their lands, or because demands on the food supply needed relief in times of famine. The choice of the target group was often based on religion, ethnicity, or occupation. Because of a famine during the reign of Augustus, all foreigners except doctors and teachers were expelled from Rome. Philosophers, who were perceived as being too ‘Greek,’ were repeatedly expelled from Rome... Expulsions by the Romans for a variety of reasons are documented... The common feature of all of them, however, is that their targets were perceived as being ‘foreigners.’ Not only were those deported from Rome often ‘foreigners’ (i.e., not citizens of Rome), but they were often viewed as foreigners at their destination as well.” (Jobes)

Of course, *especially* if you were one who had been forcibly deported to a different land, you wouldn’t just be viewed as a foreigner by the native people, you would also be *feeling* very much like a foreigner.

* All of the following is essentially based on the material in Jobes’ commentary on 1 Peter.

So when Claudius was establishing Roman colonies in north Asia Minor, who were the people he was using to populate these colonies? We don't know for sure, and no doubt there wasn't just one group of people, but we do know that right about the time when Peter was back in Jerusalem for the church counsel, there was a major expelling of *Jews* from the city of Rome (A.D. 49). Now there were some **50,000** Jews in Rome. So, were *all* the Jews being expelled, or was it a specific subgroup of the Jewish people? One Roman historian who was born only a couple of years after the Apostle Peter died wrote this, "*Since* the Jews constantly made disturbances **at the instigation of Chrestus [Christ?]**, [Claudius] expelled them from Rome." (Suetonius, quoted in Jobes) So it seems likely that it wasn't *all* of the 50,000 Jews who were being expelled, but specifically the *Christian* Jews – the Jews who had believed in Jesus as their Messiah – and maybe also some Gentile converts to Judaism who had also believed in Jesus. This actually fits with what we read in Acts chapter 18:

- Acts 18:2 — [In Corinth, Paul] found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

Is it possible, then, that Claudius populated the Roman colonies in northern Asia Minor partly with Jewish—and maybe also some Gentile—*Christians*, and that it was these **deported Christians** who then spread the Gospel and established churches in these five remote Roman provinces to which Peter writes? Is it to these deported Christians living as “foreigners” in lands far from home that the Apostle Peter writes these words? – “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the chosen, who are foreigners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...” If so, then this might actually help to explain why it's Peter who writes to them when it seems that he himself never visited these regions.

Peter in Rome?

Where did Peter go when he left Jerusalem and went to “another place”? (c.a. **A.D. 42-43**) We'll probably never know for sure, but one very reasonable possibility is that he made his way to the city of Rome. Roman Catholic tradition says that Peter founded the church in Rome and was its supreme Bishop for 25 years (**A.D. 42-67**) – which for many reasons must be false. And yet this tradition might be rooted in *some* historical reality. We can be almost 100% certain that Peter was martyred in Rome right around **A.D. 67**. It's also almost certain that Peter wrote his letter to the churches in north Asia Minor while he was *in* the city of Rome. At the end of his first letter, he writes:

- 1 Peter 5:13 — She who is at **Babylon**... sends you greetings.

We'll come back to this next week, but Peter was most likely using “Babylon” as a name for Rome. So, if Rome was the “other place” that Peter went to when he fled from Jerusalem in A.D. 42 and if Peter died in Rome around A.D. 67, this would explain the very early tradition (3rd century) of Peter's 25-year association with the city of Rome.

We know Peter wasn't in Rome for *all* of these 25 years. At some point, he was in Antioch. (Gal. 2:11) We also know that he was in Jerusalem for the church counsel. (A.D. 49-50; Acts 15)

There was likely a period of time when he wouldn't have been able to be in Rome because of the decree of Claudius. And when Paul writes his letter to the church in Rome seven years after the church counsel (in A.D. 57), Priscilla and Aquila have returned from their exile (Rom. 16:3) but there's no mention of Peter being in Rome at that time.

And yet none of this means that Peter's primary base of operations for the 25 years between his flight from Jerusalem and his martyrdom in Rome could not have been the city of Rome. If it was, this could help explain what Paul says to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians chapter one:

- 1 Corinthians 1:10–12 (cf. 3:21–23) — I appeal to you, brothers... that there be no divisions among you... For it has been reported to me... that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."

How did there come to be a "following" of Peter in the Corinthian church? It's certainly possible that Peter visited there at some point. But remember Priscilla and Aquila who came to Corinth when they were expelled from Rome? Is it possible that there were other Christians who also came from Rome, where they had been especially influenced by the Apostle Peter? Most importantly, though, if Peter's main base of operations for the 25 years between his flight from Jerusalem and his martyrdom in Rome was the city of Rome, this could explain why it's Peter who writes to Christians who've been deported from Rome in order to populate the remote and far off Roman colonies in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. This could explain why it's the Apostle Peter who writes, probably in A.D. 63 around five years before his death: "To the chosen, who are foreigners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia..."

Conclusion

As we'll see in the coming weeks and months, God used this letter to cause the church all throughout northern Asia Minor to grow and stand firm even in the midst of trials and persecution. And God has been using this letter ever since then to accomplish the same work in His church all throughout the world. We have a Greek manuscript of 1 and 2 Peter dating only one hundred to two hundred years after Peter died (see page 9). And, of course, today, we all have the inestimable treasure of all the Scriptures in our Bibles – including the letter the Apostle Peter wrote to those far away Christians so long ago.

As we conclude, I want to come back, now, to a question we asked earlier: How is it that we find the Apostle Peter, no more than 35 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, writing a letter to established churches spread all across such a vast and diverse, and relatively remote and uncivilized area as northern Asia Minor? No matter what the historical explanation may be, I think we can rightly call it a "miracle." The real explanation can *only* be found in these words of Jesus: Jesus said, "**I** will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Less than 170 years after the ascension of Jesus, the church and the Gospel of Jesus Christ had spread throughout the entire Roman Empire. And ever since then, all of history has ultimately been the record of Jesus, from His royal throne in the heavens and through His outpoured Holy

Spirit, building His church – **just as He said He would**. How is it that the Gospel has come to us – to you and to me today? How has this church come to be established right here in Morris, Illinois? There’s only one ultimate answer to that question. Jesus said, “**I** will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” That can be the only possible explanation for *this* – not simply a religious group of people gathered together in the same room, but a regenerated new creation in Christ. That’s what *this* is. And now we have the joy of being used by our King, Jesus Christ, in His **continuing** work of building His church.

Until the day that Jesus comes again, we know that He will go on building His church. Let us, then, strive to live, together, worthy of that name—“**Christ’s church**”—fully **confident** that “He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 1:6)

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