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Some Negative Thinking on the Question of Peter's Roman Residence and Martyrdom

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THE recent Vatican excavations and Dr. Oscar Cullmann's biographical study¹ have recently revived the question of Peter's residence and martyrdom in Rome. That the most recent disposition among scholars is to accept as probably true the traditional position is attested, not only by Cullmann's book, but by two recent commentaries in English on I Peter. E. G. Selwyn, who argues for the authenticity of the epistle states: "The association of St. Peter with the church of Rome for some time at least before his death is too well attested in tradition to allow of our doubting it."² F. W. Beare, though he rejects the traditional ascription of authorship, sees no reason to doubt the historicity of the account of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul by Nero, in Rome, in 64 A.D.³ Professor George Johnston is also to be numbered among the believers here.⁴

Despite this formidable weight of scholarly opinion for the tradition, and the contemporary mood of conservative acceptance of "tradition" generally, it is to be the contention here that the balance of probability still lies with the opinion that Peter died in Palestine. That we can get only balance of probability, and not proof, is freely admitted by Cullmann⁵ to whose intriguing and exhaustive study of the problem we now turn.

Cullmann cites three types of sources available to us for the study of this problem: literary, liturgical and archaeological.⁶ He puts little or no reliance on the so-called liturgical texts; none of those cited by him antedate the third century, and he concedes that "taken by themselves" they "yield little help in solving our problem".⁷ Indeed these sources reveal a twofold and contradictory tradition, both the Vatican Hill and the catacombs being connected with the memory of Peter's burial place.⁸ This difficulty Lietzmann attempted to obviate by supposing that the apostle's bones were moved from their original grave to the Appian way.⁹ The so-called liturgical texts reveal no more than the fact that by the third century the tradition of the Roman martyrdom and burial of Peter was firmly established, especially in Rome. This no one could deny.

It was in his Christmas message of 1950 that Pope Pius XII announced

1. Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple-Apostle-Martyr*, trans. F. V. Filson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953).

2. E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: The Macmillan Co. Ltd., 1947), p. 61.

3. F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947), pp. 10-11.

4. G. Johnston, review of Cullmann's *Peter* in *Canadian Journal of Theology*, I (April, 1955), p. 54.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 77, f.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

5. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 114, etc.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

that "the grave of the Prince of the Apostles has been found." The Pope conceded that the mortal remains of Peter had not been identified. With admirable clarity Cullmann summarizes the evidence that led the Pope to make his claim:

Presumably, however—though not at all with certainty—we may assert . . . that the "trophy" of Gaius appears to have been found. If this is true, it is the single positive result of the excavations as far as they concern Peter; the result is thus a confirmation of the literary testimony of Gaius, which, however, takes us back only to the end of the second century.¹⁰

Gaius was a Roman presbyter who lived about the turn of the century. The passage of interest to us here is one in which Gaius is countering the claim of the Montanist Proculus that the church in Hierapolis has the graves of Philip and his daughters. To make a much greater claim for Rome, Gaius is quoted by Eusebius as follows:

But I can show you the trophies (*trophæia*) of the apostles, for if you go to the Vatican Hill or to the highway to Ostia, you will find the trophies of those who have founded this church.¹¹

Cullmann conceded that Gaius' claim that the two apostles founded the church at Rome is inaccurate.¹² Moreover, it is Eusebius, not Gaius, who names the apostles. Furthermore, it is not clear whether a *trophæion* is a grave or a victory memorial, although Eusebius himself, it would seem, understood the word in the sense of "grave."

In a largely pagan cemetery, underneath the Church of St. Peter, part of a monument has been found which may be the "trophy" referred to by Gaius. That in the vicinity some bones have also been found confirms our suspicion that cemeteries may well contain bones! We have also to contend with an ancient tradition that associates Peter with Paul in burial on the Appian Way.¹³ To account for this conflict some defenders of the tradition assert one or more transfers of the apostolic relics between the two places.¹⁴ That the grave of Peter was located in the Vatican area at all is doubted by Cullmann because, (a) it is unlikely that Christians would have buried Peter in the vicinity of Nero's garden, and (b) the apocalyptic expectations of this time militated against a cult of relics in the late first century.¹⁵ Interest in relics, states Cullmann, can be first seen about the time of Gaius himself.¹⁶ "The archaeological investigations do not permit us to answer in either a negative or an affirmative way the questions as to the stay of Peter in Rome. The grave of Peter cannot be identified."¹⁷ This is Cullmann's own estimate of the value of the archaeological evidence.

Father Roger T. O'Callaghan, in a recent issue of *The Biblical Archaeologist* gives his interpretation of the results of the recent excavations. He is,

10. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 118, quoting Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 31, 4.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 149.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

as we should expect, somewhat more enthusiastic than Cullmann about what they have to offer. Father O'Callaghan cites Cullmann's willingness to concede the finding of the trophy of Gaius and he states that Cullmann's book was published "before the news of the inscription in the Valerii mausoleum".¹⁸ This inscription is, it seems, a portrait of "two heads, one above the other."¹⁹ The lower of these heads is "traced in red lead and partly redone in charcoal. It is of an old man, completely bald, with a deeply furrowed brow and large eyes."²⁰ But the inscription is dated about 270–290 A.D.²¹

All in all, the excavations seem to confirm what was already well known—that a cult of apostolic relics in this area goes back into the third century, perhaps back as far as 160 A.D., if that be the date of the monument referred to by Gaius. Archaeology has not made any less decisive the witness and the silences of the first and early second century witnesses. It is to these that we must now turn.

John 21, a supplement to the gospel notoriously difficult to accredit and date, contains, as it stands, a reference to Peter's martyrdom in verse 19a, which is a commentary on the enigmatic words attributed to Jesus in verse 18:

18. "I tell you, when you were young, you used to gird yourself and go where you pleased, but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you and take you where you do not wish to go."

19. He said this to show the kind of death by which Peter was to honor God. (Goodspeed's translation.)

The direct speech in verse 18, separated from the narrator's comment in verse 19a, could refer merely to the helplessness of old age, or to imprisonment. But it seems more natural to keep the words of Jesus and the comment on them together, and to understand that the writer of John 21 referred to the martyrdom of Peter, almost certainly after its occurrence. Cullmann's comment, following Leitzmann, that "it was hardly customary to hand down accounts of martyrdom with no indication of place"²² seems strange here. For this appears to be precisely what the author of John 21 did in fact do! Nowhere in the words in which Jesus commissions Peter to feed his sheep is there any suggestion of Peter's removal to a remote place. And this is in a passage that almost certainly postdated Peter's death, however and wherever it occurred. All that John 21 tells us is that at the time of its writing the tradition of a martyred Peter had been formed in the Church. There may also be an allusion to martyrdom in the body of the gospel, at 13:36–38.

Leaving aside as mere conjecture the identification of the two prophets of Revelation 11 as Peter and Paul,²³ we turn to what, it would seem, is

18. R. T. O'Callaghan, "Vatican Excavations and the Tomb of Peter", *The Biblical Archaeologist*, XVI (1953), p. 86.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

22. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

the most important New Testament witness for the theory of a Roman sojourn for Peter—the reference to “Babylon” in I Peter 5:13. It does indeed seem more likely that Babylon is a cryptogram for Rome rather than a reference to a place of that name in Mesopotamia or Egypt.²⁴ If the writer of this epistle is indeed Peter or Silvanus, as Selwyn thinks, this reference must be counted heavily in favour of the historicity of the tradition of a Roman residence—more so than the much-debated, but quite ambiguous, I Clement 5:4. Even if the proper personal and place names are part of the device of pseudepigraphy, as Beare believes, and the date of the epistle is about 115 A.D., you do have a tradition connecting Peter and Rome early in the second century. But still, it must be noted, about fifty years after Peter died, if he died in the reign of Nero.

The reference in II Peter 2:14 is of no help at all, being merely the words of an old man anticipating his own death. In fact its lack of reference to martyrdom and locality rather counts against the Roman residence tradition as the undoubted late date of II Peter would perhaps make one expect an allusion to martyrdom in Rome. Whether historical or not, the tradition of Roman residence must have been established close to the date of the composition of this pseudepigraphon.

In the New Testament, then, we have allusions to, probably reminiscences of, Peter's martyrdom in John 13:36 and 21:18, 19a. But the only passage which may place Peter in Rome toward the end of his life is I Peter 5:13. If we accept Professor Beare's date of about 115 for I Peter,²⁵ we have the earliest reference associating Peter with Rome written about half a century after his alleged martyrdom there, unless we except I Clement 5:4 to which we must now turn, after noting once more that there is no single New Testament reference to a Roman martyrdom. As it is the place, not the fact, of martyrdom, that is under debate, I Peter 5:13 is certainly the crucial New Testament passage. It seems surprising that the defenders of the tradition pay comparatively little attention to it.

Professor Cullmann regards I Clement as “the decisive literary witness” and states: “If a relatively great probability is anywhere attainable for one view or the other, it must be in the fifth chapter of this writing.”²⁶ Before we examine this passage, we might point out that the almost certain date of 96 A.D. for I Clement is still thirty years after Nero. This would give plenty of time for a form of tradition about a martyred Peter to take upon itself a local aspect not present in the earlier accounts. But it is to be the contention here that it is by no means certain that we have in the fifth and sixth chapters of this writing a reference to a Roman martyrdom at all.

The relevant texts are in a more extended passage in which Clement is discussing the evil results of jealousy. He refers to the histories of the following victims of jealousy: Abel, Esau, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and Miriam,

24. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

25. Beare, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–19.

26. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

Dathan and Abiram and David.²⁷ Then comes the decisive passage for our purpose which we will set forth in full in Goodspeed's translation:

V. But to pass from ancient examples, let us come to those who have most recently proved champions; let us take up the noble examples of our own generation. (2) Because of jealousy and envy the greatest and most upright pillars of the church were persecuted and competed unto death. (3) Let us bring before our eyes the good apostles!—(4) Peter, who because of unrighteous jealousy endured not one or two, but numerous trials, and so bore a martyr's witness and went to the glorious place that he deserved. (5) Because of jealousy and strife Paul pointed the way to the reward of endurance; (6) seven times he was imprisoned, he was exiled, he was stoned, he was a preacher in both east and west, and won great renown for his faith, teaching uprightness to the whole world, and reaching the farthest limit of the west, (7) and bearing a martyr's witness he passed out of the world and was taken up into the holy place, having proved a very great example of endurance.

VI. With these men who have lived holy lives has been gathered a great multitude of God's chosen, who have set a splendid example among us in enduring many humiliations and tortures on account of jealousy. (2) On account of jealousy women have been persecuted and made to endure dreadful and unholy insults, as Danaids and Dirces, and reached the sure goal in the race of faith and won the true prize, weak in body though they were. (3) Jealousy has estranged wives from their husbands, and nullified the words of our forefather Adam, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh." (4) Jealousy and strife have overthrown great cities and uprooted great nations.

VII. We write this, dear friends, not only to warn you, but also to remind ourselves, for we are in the same arena, and the same contest is before us.

Concerning this passage, Cullmann says: "This is thus the only passage that speaks explicitly of the death of Peter, and it should be said at the outset that we do not learn much from it. We must therefore see whether and how far it is permitted to derive more from the context."²⁸

Two clues to a possible local reference in I Clement 5:4 are: (1) The fact that Peter and Paul are cited as victims of jealousy—presumably jealousy among Christians. We learn from Philippians 1:15–17 that this situation did exist in the place of Paul's imprisonment which was, in all probability, but not certainty, Rome.²⁹ (2) By associating Peter and Paul with "the great multitude of God's chosen who have set a splendid example among us" (*en hēmin*), identifying the "great multitude" as the Neronian martyrs and interpreting *en hēmin* locally, we get a Roman reference here.³⁰

Against the first of these two considerations, it could be argued that we are by no means sure of the Roman origin of Philippians. But even if we should concede this the fact remains that Clement's readers in Corinth, if they retained any memories of Paul's letters, would have the best reason in the world to know that Rome had no monopoly on jealousy or contentiousness among Christians.

27. I Clement 4:1–13.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

28. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Cullmann's statement: "Only concerning the Roman church do we know that jealousy reigned in it,"³¹ is extraordinary, especially in view of the fact that Clement's letter or sermon is to Corinth. Two words used by Clement, *zēlos* and *eris*, with a definite local reference appear together in both Corinthian letters (I Cor. 3:3; II Cor. 13:20). In view of these texts, and the whole story of Paul's difficulty with the Corinthians because of contending factions,³² it is difficult to account for the following statement of Cullmann: "Clement is characterizing the vice which is causing such devastating results in the previously so exemplary church of Corinth that he is addressing."³³

Against Cullmann's second reason for reading in a Roman reference here, can be put the possibility that there is no necessary geographical and temporal connection between Peter and Paul and the "great multitude of God's chosen." It is quite possible, perhaps likely, that in chapter six as in chapter five we have merely a list of seven incidents of jealousy and its dire results, listed chronologically.

Moreover, it is an undoubted fact that the phrase *en hēmin* carries no necessary spatial and geographical connotation, as Cullmann seems to think.³⁴ In the two very familiar passages, Luke 1:2 and John 1:14 it refers, in the first instance, to the whole Christian community (almost certainly), and in the second, most probably, to all mankind. There may be a geographical reference in Acts 2:29, but not in a narrow, specific sense. In I Corinthians 3:18 *en hēmin* refers to the society rather than its place of existence as it does in the familiar Synoptic reference to the kingdom of God being *en-humin*.³⁵ It would seem that the normal Christian usage of this phrase did not carry spatial limitation at all. If, as Cullmann testifies, the balance of probability will be decided by the Clementine reference, it does not appear to the present writer that this tips the scales at all decisively for the legend. The ambiguity of the passage is seen in the fact that for C. C. Torrey it is a witness against the tradition of a Roman residence:

We can only wonder, for example, how Bacon, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 284, could find the doctrine of Peter's martyrdom at Rome "seemingly present in Clement *ad. Cor.* v. 4 and vi. 1"(!); for, so far from any such "seeming", the idea is excluded by the passage. Clement knows that Peter gave the supreme witness somewhere, and he says this much, in very general terms. . . . But in the next-following sentences, as he comes to speak of Paul, his enthusiasm mounts and he is much more definite. Paul, he says, preached the gospel "both in the east *and also in the west*," and in the latter region suffered martyrdom "in the presence of the rulers." It is perfectly evident that Clement had no knowledge of a sojourn of Peter in Rome, or of his alleged martyrdom there, and the fact is decisive. This means, unquestionably, that the Roman church

31. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

32. I Cor. 1:10, f.; 3:3, f. etc.

33. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 99. Cullmann seems to contradict this statement on p. 103 where he refers to Clement's reminder in chapter 47 of the earlier partisan divisions in Corinth.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 97. "But the fact that. . . Clement uses the words 'among us' proves that he is concerned to give in the second group examples that are particularly close to him in place." See also p. 105.

35. Luke 17:21.

of the first century knew nothing of any labors of the great apostle in their city.³⁶

Somewhere along the line of tradition that transformed an illiterate Galilean fisherman³⁷ into the founder of the church at Rome, the writer of encyclical letters in learned Greek, and the Prince of the Apostles, the first of the Popes, history breaks off and hagiographic legend takes over. Dr. Cullmann, as we have seen, and perhaps the majority of contemporary Protestant scholars take as historical the tradition that Peter went to Rome, but reject the claim that he founded the church there. The break comes somewhere. Our argument is simply that it is reasonable, and inherently probable, to assume that it comes before the alleged journey to Rome or the New Testament writings that post-date that journey would almost certainly have contained some reference to it.

The silence of the Epistle to the Romans makes it almost certain that Peter was not in Rome by the date of that writing. Beare believes that he was not there when Paul arrived in 62 A.D. and that the location of Peter's late missionary activity was the area mentioned in the salutation to I Peter.³⁸ He supports the historicity of the Roman residence tradition because of the "absence of any rival tradition."³⁹ This absence could be accounted for by the fact, if it be a fact, that Peter died a natural and unheroic death in Palestine. The New Testament references to martyrdom indicate, however, that Peter did indeed die the martyr's death—and we see no reason to dispute this. For what purpose did Peter, whose sphere of responsibility was to "the circumcision"⁴⁰ make the hazardous journey to Rome when he was almost certainly an old man? Surely it is easier to account for this story in later decades, when the churches were contending for supremacy among themselves on the basis of the possession of apostolic relics, than to make this unnecessary and, as we contend, unsupported assumption. Peter, unlike Paul, was not a Roman citizen. No business would take him there. His language was not Hellenistic Greek, certainly not the rather elaborate idiom of I Peter, but Aramaic with a definite provincial accent.

It seems to be a characteristic of our time that we have a disposition to glorify hagiographa with the wonderful word "tradition" and assume that any tale is better than none—that in the absence of a contemporary record we must accept later "traditions," however aetiologically explicable these may be, as a more reliable clue than inherent, historical probability. Thus, in the "absence of any rival tradition"—it would seem—we must accept as historical the dogma of the physical ascension of the Blessed Virgin!

But is there no alternative to the received tradition in this case? Two

36. C. C. Torrey, *Documents of the Primitive Church* (New York: Harper Bros., 1941), p. 10.

37. Acts 4:13. *agrammatos* meaning "without letters".

38. F. W. Beare, "Acts 9-15 and Peter's Career", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXII (1943), p. 302.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

40. Gal. 2:7.

writers, D. F. Robinson⁴¹ and W. M. Smaltz,⁴² have argued that we may indeed have a cryptic reference to Peter's death in Jerusalem in 44 A.D. in Acts 12:1-19.

This story as it stands, of course, does not say that Peter died, but it does say that he "went into another place" (*eporeuthē eis heteron topon*)⁴³ and it is possible to argue that this expression is a euphemism, and a characteristically Lucan euphemism, for dying. Thus Peter's deliverance from prison and appearance to a company of believers at the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, is a kind of resurrection appearance. Robinson acknowledges the embarrassment that Peter's role in the conference described in Acts 15 creates for his view, but he points out the difficulties recognized by all in integrating Acts 15 into the chronological framework demanded by the autobiographical section of Galatians, the apparent contradiction between Galatians 2:7-9 and Acts 15:7 and the subordinate role of Peter in Acts 15. His conclusion is that Acts 15 has no historical value, being a late creation of the Jerusalem church to counteract its original mistake of opposing the Gentile mission.⁴⁴ The name "Cephas" in Galatians 2:9 would seem to indicate that Peter was alive about 52 A.D. but, as Robinson points out, the word appears in a different place in the several manuscripts and may well be an interpolation.⁴⁵

W. M. Smaltz accepts Robinson's view that Acts 12:1-19 "represents an idealized account of the apostle's demise while suffering imprisonment under Herod Agrippa I."⁴⁶ He proceeds to support this thesis by a careful examination of the phrase *eporeuthē eis heteron topon* in Acts 12:17. That the word "go" was in the Biblical languages, as in modern English, sometimes an euphemism for dying is seen in the translation of *halakh* by *poreuesthai* in the LXX at Psalms 39:14 and Genesis 15:2. In the New Testament a good example appears at Luke 22:22, and here we have evidence of Lucan predilection for the expression as the Marcan (14:21) and Matthean (26:24) parallels have another word, *hupagein*.⁴⁷ A Lucan reference to Peter's prophecy of his own death (22:33) has the same verb (*poreuesthai eis thanaton*) where Mark (14:31) and Matthew (26:35) have the straightforward (*sun*) *apothanein*.

Smaltz conjectures that the "Peter" of Acts 15:2 is in fact a confused reference for the "Symeon" of Acts 13:1.⁴⁸

But the most telling of Smaltz's arguments is the similarity between

41. D. F. Robinson, "Where and When did Peter Die?", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXIV (1945), p. 255, f.

42. W. M. Smaltz, "Did Peter Die in Jerusalem?", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXI (1952), p. 211, f.

43. Acts 12:17.

44. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

45. *Textus receptus* here, listing the names "James and Cephas and John" is supported by B and Aleph. A has only "James and John". p. 46 has "James and Peter and John". D and G have "Peter and James and John"—all in the order given. The argument here is that the word "Cephas" is not securely embedded in the text.

46. Smaltz, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

eporeuthē eis heteron topon in Luke 12:17 and *eporeuthē eis ton opheilomenon topon tēs doxēs* in I Clement 5:4. The present writer finds it difficult to resist the conclusion of Smaltz that “seen side by side in the Greek, it is difficult not to think that Clement had the Lucan passage in mind when he wrote.”⁴⁹ Added to this is the fact that Clement, when he comes to speak of Paul’s death writes *kai eis ton hagian topon eporeuthē*.⁵⁰

It is conceded, with Cullmann, that we cannot have proof, one way or another, as to the location of the site of Peter’s last days. What we are concerned to contest here is the assumption that, in the absence of contending traditions, a late but received tradition is better than none. This is more especially so when the growth of that tradition can be explained—in this case by the contest for supremacy among the churches and the importance of the possession of apostolic relics in that contest. The “Gaius” passage in Eusebius explains the reason for the growth of the tradition rather than attests to its historicity.

It may be that Acts 12:1–19 throws some light on the mystery of Peter’s death. The arguments of Robinson and Smaltz, while not completely convincing, are, to say the least, plausible and worthy of study. But even if we must reject their thesis, the strange silences and ambiguous references in the early literature leave open the strong possibility that the great apostle died among his own people to whose evangelism his life had been dedicated.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

50. I Clement 5:7.