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Where Did Peter Go?

While the 'other place' may be well known to students of Oxford and Cambridge universities, it is not so easily identified by students of the New Testament. What destination is meant by Luke's *heteron topon* of Acts 12:17? Roman Catholic scholars have in the past held to the view that Peter went at an early date to Rome and that the *heteron topon* is a reference to that city. Protestant scholars, on the other hand, while not denying that Peter eventually went to Rome and died there during the persecution under Nero in AD 64–65, have held to the view that he did not go there immediately after his release from prison. Oscar Cullmann, for example, says: 'In reality, that "other place" can be identified with any city of the Roman Empire.'¹ It is generally agreed that the imprisonment of Peter took place in AD 44 – the year in which Herod Agrippa I died. This date is supported by the writings of Josephus and by Jewish coins.² It was immediately after the Passover³ in that year that Peter left Jerusalem for the *heteron topon*. In Galatians 2:11 Paul informs us that when Peter came to Antioch he opposed him to his face because of his stand in favour of the Jewish food laws. This incident must have occurred after Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison. Ancient tradition states that Peter founded the church at Antioch and became its first bishop following the dispersion recorded in Acts 11:19.⁴ If this tradition is true, then Peter must have left Antioch after founding the church there and returned after Paul's arrival. It seems to me that what probably happened was that Peter established the church among the Jews and, when the gospel spread to the Greeks, Barnabas went to find Paul. This is supported in Paul's statement in Galatians 2:7: 'I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles).' In Acts 15 Peter reappears at the Apostolic Council, which is usually dated c. AD 49. He could hardly have been in Rome when Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans; otherwise how could he have written: 'It is my ambition to bring the gospel to places where the very name of Christ has not

1. O. Cullmann, *Peter, Disciple-Apostle-Martyr* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 38.

2. Cf. G. Ogg, 'Chronology of the New Testament,' *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (1962), p. 730.

3. Cf. R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology, 626 B.C.–A.D. 75*, whose tables show that Passover in AD 44 fell on 1 May; since Passover was a seven-day feast (Exodus 12:15) and Herod Agrippa I did not want to execute Peter during the feast he must have escaped around 7 May (p. 47).

4. Cf. Origen, *Homily on Luke*, vi (PG. 13, 1814ff.); Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, iii, 36, 2:22; Chrysostom, *Homily on Ignatius*; Jerome, on Gal. 2:1 (PL. 26, 340); *De viribus illustribus*, i (PL. 23, 637).

been heard, for I do not want to build on another man's foundation' (Rom. 15:20). Again, the letter to Rome is usually thought to have been written from Corinth during the three months Paul lived there before visiting Jerusalem c. AD 57–58. This chronological scheme does not fully account for Peter's activities between AD 44 and 58. Here is a period of some fourteen years, during which Peter must have been busily engaged in missionary activity. The First Epistle of Peter is addressed 'to the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia' (1 Peter 1:1). Did Peter preach in these provinces? There is no clear proof that he did, but his letter reflects intimate knowledge of the circumstances of these congregations scattered throughout the five Roman provinces. He may well have preached in some of these provinces, particularly those not visited by Paul⁵ – that is, Pontus, Cappadocia, and Bithynia. This suggestion opens up a fascinating possibility. Luke informs us in Acts 16:7 that Barnabas and Paul 'attempted to go into Bithynia but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.' Can we interpret this to mean that the receipt of the news that Peter had already evangelized these areas was the guidance from the Holy Spirit which Paul received? Paul now goes over to Europe and makes his headquarters at Corinth, where Peter apparently followed him (Cf. 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:32). The New Testament evidence supports the view that Peter went first to Antioch, then possibly to the provinces in northern Asia Minor, and then crossed into Greece and came to Corinth.⁶ But the question is: where did he go immediately following his release from prison? What are we to understand by the *heteron topon* of Acts 12:17? D. F. Robinson⁷ has proposed the theory that Peter did in fact die in Jerusalem following the Passover in AD 44, as Herod Agrippa I intended he should. The *heteron topon* was a metaphorical way of saying that Peter had 'gone to the place of glory.' What Rhoda and the gathered church saw was his angel. This was in fact just what they said: *ho angelos estin autou* (Acts 12:15). This theory, attractive as it may seem, suffers shipwreck on the evidence of John 21:18–19; Acts 15; and Galatians 2, which support the view that Peter escaped execution at the time of his imprisonment at Jerusalem in AD 44 – a view further supported by the First Epistle of Clement 5: 2–7, which refers to his martyrdom at Rome in AD 64. There is the further possibility that Luke was simply using one of his stereotyped modes of expression to get Peter out of the way in order to continue his narrative about Paul. At least one scholar thinks that Peter's destination was Alexandria. This he thinks accounts for Matthew's heightening of the importance of Peter since he too was connected with Alexandria.⁸ This hypothesis, I should think, would

5. Cf. F. V. Filson, *Opening the New Testament*, p. 194.

6. Peter's ministry in Corinth is also recorded by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, 25.

7. Cf. D. F. Robinson, 'Where and when did Peter Die?' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 64 (1945), 225–67.

8. Cf. S. G. F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* (1951), p. 211ff., 225, 232, 242.

no longer be tenable since the publication of K. Stendahl's thesis that Matthew emanated from a catechetical school at Antioch. F. W. Beare⁹ thinks that, following his escape from prison, Peter became a fugitive, changing his abode frequently, and that it was during this period in which he was lying low that he underwent the experiences recounted in Acts 9 and 10. This theory necessitates a reconstruction of the chronology of Acts which places his journey through Judaea, his vision, and his first baptism of Gentiles at Caesarea *after* the escape from prison in Acts 12:17. However, the picture that one gets of Peter in Acts 9 and 10 is not that of a hunted criminal. On the contrary, he 'went here and there among them all' (*dierchomenon dia pantōn*). The New English Bible rendering is: 'Peter was making a general tour' — but this is probably too free a rendering of the Greek. Even more detrimental to Beare's reconstruction is the story of Cornelius. Is it possible that a man wanted by the Roman police would be the guest of a Roman centurion — even a Christian one? Would he not go farther afield?

It seems to me that a recent article may supply the clue to the mystery concerning Peter's destination. This article first appeared in the *New College Bulletin* in 1965¹⁰ and has since been reprinted in *The Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society*. In this article J. C. L. Gibson says: 'The task I have set myself is in brief to propose a new approach to that most engrossing of detective pursuits, the uncovering of the lineaments of primitive Palestinian Aramaic speaking Christianity.'¹¹ He goes on to present a convincing argument for Aramaic being the *lingua franca* in the east as Greek was in the west. In this respect Dr. Gibson contends, against the long cherished views of F. C. Burkitt, that the eastern Church flourished in a Semitic environment and shared a common language during the Apostolic Age. A glimpse of the wide bounds of the Jewish Diaspora is reflected in Acts 2:9–11: 'Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.' Gibson notes that half these areas lay to the east of Palestine. It was this eastern Diaspora, about which the New Testament says nothing, which provided a fertile soil for the gospel seed. Now if his thesis is sound — and I think it is — then the attractive possibility opens up that Peter may have gone to this eastern area following his escape from prison. Indeed this possibility was suggested years ago by F. J. Foakes-Jackson:

'But, on the other hand, there is no tradition whatever of Peter's movements after the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15): and, if, as is stated in Galatians, Peter

9. Cf. F. W. Beare, 'The Sequence of Events in Acts 9–15 and the Career of Peter,' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 42 (1943), 295–306.

10. Cf. J. C. L. Gibson, 'From Qumran to Edessa or Aramaic-Speaking Church before and after AD 70,' *New College Bulletin*, II, 2 (1965), 9–19.

11. *Ibid.*, 10.

and Paul agreed to go the one to the Gentiles, and the other to the Jews, then Peter may well have gone eastward whilst Paul journeyed to the West. There was a large Jewish population in Mesopotamia, and it was a splendid field of missionary enterprise.¹²

The *heteron topon* therefore may be identified as the eastern Diaspora centred at Edessa. What Foakes-Jackson could only guess at in the darkness has had shafts of light thrown upon it from recent discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel of Thomas. These recent finds support the view that one of the links in Christian origins is the Aramaic-speaking eastern Diaspora.

One further piece of evidence in support of my theory is that we know from the New Testament that Paul's native language was Greek (Acts 21:38) whereas Peter's was Aramaic (Matt. 26:73).¹³ Scholars have also noted that Aramaic probably underlies Peter's speeches as recorded in Acts.¹⁴ Moreover, wherever Paul refers to Peter in his Epistles he calls him by his Aramaic (*Kēphas*) rather than his Greek (*Petros*) name. This then being the case, what is more likely than that Peter, upon his release from prison, sought refuge beyond Palestine in a place where Aramaic was spoken. The Jerusalem congregation did the same after the martyrdom of James the Lord's brother in AD 62, when they fled to Pella. Peter went to the place where he could communicate the gospel, that is, to the eastern Diaspora in those lands east of Antioch which we call the Syriac-speaking church. Moreover, and this may be of more relevance today, he took his wife with him! (1 Cor. 9:5)¹⁵

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12. F. J. Foakes-Jackson, *Peter: Prince of Apostles* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), p. 117.

13. Mark, who is generally thought to be the interpreter of Peter, retains in his Gospel many Aramaic words, thus indicating that this was the language of Jesus and his disciples. Cf. e.g. Mark 3:17; 5:41; 7:11; 7:34; 14:36; 15:34; etc.

14. E.g. C. C. Torrey, M. Black, M. Wilcox.

15. The footnote in *The Jerusalem Bible* which refers this to the Christian women who supplied the material needs of the apostles is a concession to dogma rather than hermeneutics!