

The Early Reception and Appropriation of the Apostle Peter (60–800 CE)

The Anchors of the Fisherman

Edited by

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Peter, the Visionary before the Pope: Early Receptions of the Apostle in Marginal Communities

Régis Burnet

As the Savior was sitting in the temple in the three hundredth (year) of the covenant and the agreement of the tenth pillar, and being satisfied with the number of the living, incorruptible Majesty, he said to me, 'Peter, [...] there shall be others of those who are outside our number who name themselves bishops and also deacons, as if they have received their authority from God. They bend themselves under the judgment of the leaders. Those people are dry canals.'¹



What a surprise! Whereas everyone is accustomed, because of two millennia of reception history, to see Peter as the first bishop and the first pope, as the faithful guardian of the primacy of Rome, the Nag Hammadi *Apocalypse of Peter* presents him as a dangerous opponent of the hierarchy. How was such a reversal possible? This paper proposes to listen to some voices coming from behind the scenes using the concept of anchoring innovation introduced by Ineke Sluiter.² They tell us a different story, an alternative vision of the great apostle: the story of his appropriation by communities of the margin.

“Communities of the margin” and not “heterodox Christianity” or, worse, “heretic Christians” since no clear orthodoxy was established yet. And even their opponents would not have considered them as “heterodox” since there were only polemical statements in a broader and prolonged discussion. Within a controversy, the closer the opponents are to each other, the more likely they

¹ *Apoc. Pet.* (NH VII) 70.15–20 and 79.22–30, translated by James Brashler and Roger A. Bullard in Robinson (2000) 373.6.

² Sluiter (2017).

are to exaggerate their differences. Sigmund Freud called that inclination *der Narzissmus der kleinen Differenzen*,³ narcissism of little differences.

More than alternative Christians, these communities were indeed alternative readers of the Bible. In the case of Peter, they underline unusual features of the figure of the Galilean fisher. The conventional interpretation of the apostle lies upon a single feature: his status of “head of the Twelve,” or *princeps apostolorum*. These alternative visions stress upon different facets of his personality. The earliest accounts outside the New Testament do not highlight the authoritative side of Peter, but a secondary feature: his role as a visionary. Two canonical episodes demonstrated his visionary abilities: The Transfiguration, of course (Matt 17.1–9, Mark 9.2–9, Luke 9.28–36), but also the Vision of the Animals (Acts 10.9–23). Instead of putting the emphasis on the famous pericope of Matt 16.17–19, they gave more importance to these traditions.

1 The First Steps of a Visionary

1.1 *The Gospel of Peter*

A large amount of bibliography about the Gospel found in Akhmîm in Egypt prevents us from giving a thorough insight into the earliest text of Peter's Reception, the Gospel of Peter.⁴ Suffice it to say it may be the text mentioned by Serapion of Antioch at the beginning of the third century (although some scholars are circumspect about this identification).⁵ It is an early composition from a Judeo-Christian community of Syria,⁶ presented as authored by Peter, who says “I” at several moments (e.g., v. 26–27 and 59–60). The text relates a vision of three men exiting the tomb:

They saw coming out from the tomb three men, and the two were supporting the one, and a cross following them. And the head of the two reached as far as heaven, but that of the one being led by them surpassed the heavens.⁷

The episode does not show Peter as a visionary per se. Here, the testimony comes from the soldiers witnessing the events⁸ and not from him. Moreover,

3 Freud (1991) 131.

4 See also Bockmuehl's contribution to this volume.

5 Foster (2006; 2010) 97–115.

6 Foster (2010) 172–3.

7 *Gosp. Pet.* – Akhmîm Fragment 10.39–42, translation by Foster (2010) 408.

8 Mara (1973) 180.

this is not a vision as such, because the events are presented as actual; they are not imaginations through the eyes of the soul. Besides, the staging is peculiar: the character in the middle is not the Son of God in his glory, but a weak figure, who must be sustained and supported. Nevertheless, the gigantic dimensions of the three men do not only have a spectacular value: the size is a theological statement on their authority both in heaven and on earth.⁹ Their presence in a text authored by Peter is a first step in the construction of the figure of the apostle as someone who can tell more things than others.

1.2 *The Apocalypse of Peter*

Whereas the Gospel of Peter did not present Peter as a visionary, the Apocalypse of Peter unmistakably establishes Peter as a seer. Not all the scholars date it from the Bar Kochba's revolt time as R. Bauckham does,¹⁰ but even the more skeptics ones¹¹ assign a Judeo-Christian community in Syria or Palestine as its origin. Even though the text addresses issues from the second century, it kept being read because of its description of hell, a kind of guided tour influenced by both Hellenism and Judaism.¹² The text is a very early step of the reception of the figure of the apostle, before its appropriation by Rome as "the first bishop."

Two passages are essential for our inquiry. The first one reveals the future of the apostle:

I have spoken this to you, Peter, and declared it to you. Go forth therefore and go to the city of the west and enter into the vineyard which I shall tell you of, so that by the sufferings of the Son who is without sin the deeds of corruption may be sanctified. As for you, you are chosen according to the promise which I have given you. Spread my gospel throughout all the world in peace.¹³

The martyrdom of Peter, here firmly established, takes on an eschatological meaning. It is the starting signal of the divine purification of the deeds of corruption. The apostle, now described as the "chosen one," leads the universal proclamation of the Gospel. This role is a piece of clear evidence that the

9 Foster (2010) 419; Mara (1973) 183; Vaganay (1930) 300.

10 Bauckham (1988; 1994).

11 Tigchelaar (2003).

12 Bremmer (2010); Himmelfarb (1985) 45–50.

13 *Apoc. Pet.* 14.4–6, trans. Elliott (2005) 609.

members of the community do not think of themselves as marginal Christians. Their Syrian leader, Peter, was indeed the frontrunner of the Gospel.

The second extract is a paraphrase of the Transfiguration:

And the Lord continued and said, 'Let us go to the mountain and pray'. [...] As we prayed, suddenly there appeared two men standing before the Lord upon whom we were not able to look. 7. For there issued from their countenance a ray as of the sun and their raiment was shining such as the eye of a man never saw the like; for no mouth is able to declare nor heart to conceive the glory wherewith they were clad and the beauty of their countenance. 8. When we saw them we were astonished, for their bodies were whiter than any snow and redder than any rose. 9. And the redness of them was mingled with the whiteness and I am simply not able to declare their beauty. [...] And I drew near to the Lord and said, 'Who are these?' 13. He said to me, 'These are your righteous brethren whose appearance you wished to see'. 14. And I said to him, 'And where are all the righteous? What is the world of those who possess this glory?' 15. And the Lord showed me a very great region outside this world [...] And I rejoiced and believed and understood that which is written in the book of my Lord Jesus Christ. And I said to him, 'O my Lord, do you wish that I make here three tabernacles, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah?' 43 And he said to me in wrath, 'Satan makes war against you, and has veiled your understanding; and the good things of this world prevail against you. Your eyes, therefore, must be opened, and your ears unstopped that you may see a tabernacle, not made with men's hands, which my heavenly Father has made for me and for the elect'. And we beheld it and were full of gladness.¹⁴

Although the text seems to rely on the Gospel of Matthew, the staging is utterly different. This is not about the transfiguration of Jesus, but the transfiguration of Moses and Elijah. More than teaching on the divinity of Jesus – which was confessed the readers of the *Apocalypse of Peter* –, the text stresses upon the fate of the Jewish Fathers, who shall take part of the glory of God. This transfiguration is a manifesto for Judean Christianity. The passage also aims at correcting the Gospel of Matthew. Messianic movements could interpret Peter's offer to construct tents as a claim to rebuild the tangible Temple. The text replies it clearly: only the celestial tent or the spiritual Temple will be able to stand in the future. And only a visionary attitude can grant access to it:

¹⁴ *Apoc. Pet.* 15–16. Elliott (2005) 609–11.

‘Your eyes, therefore, must be opened, and your ears unstopped that you may see a tabernacle’.

2 The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter

The *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, found in Nag Hammadi (7th codex, 3rd treatise) is the final step of the interpretation of Peter as a seer. It also sheds light on the struggle of the Petrine community against (at the same time) a baptismal permissiveness, the building of a strict hierarchy and some theological ideas close to Pauline theology.¹⁵ The text comes from a Basilidian community, and we know that Basilides was a student of Glaukias, a disciple of Peter.¹⁶ Even if the Apocalypse was written in Alexandria, the link with Syria is not to be dismissed. Egyptian churches had early relationships with Judean-Christian Syro-Palestinian communities.

2.1 *Peter as a Docete*

In this Apocalypse, Peter is associated with a very strong controversy against the ecclesiastical hierarchy and with Docetism:

I said: ‘What is it that I see, O Lord? Is it you yourself whom they take and are you grasping me? Or who is the one who is glad and who is laughing above the wood and do they hit another one on his feet and on his hands?’ The Savior said to me: ‘The one you see glad and laughing above the wood, that is the Living One, Jesus. But the one into whose hands and feet they are driving the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute’.¹⁷

The passage is utterly clear. The motif of the laughter at the Cross is a typical Docete one, according to Irenaeus:¹⁸ Jesus scoffs at his enemies who crucified a fake body, whereas he is hovering, still living, above the Cross, described by the metonymy $\omega\epsilon$, ‘wood’, also known in the New Testament – we can think of \acute{o} κρεμάμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου of *Galatians* 3.13. The theme of the *substitute* alludes to a corporal stand-in without true consistency (hence the Coptic term $\Delta\Delta\iota\mu\omega\eta$) and is the key concept for Docetism. Thanks to the substitute, the Savior could

¹⁵ Brakke (2008).

¹⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Str.* 7.106, 4.

¹⁷ *Apoc. Pet.* 81.7–21, translation Havelaar (1999) 47–9.

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Adv. Hær.* 1.24.4. Stroumsa (2004).

be seen in the world without any incarnation. He seemed to be in a body, but this body was only a *daimôn*, a ghost.

We can perceive that evolution has taken place within the margins claiming Peter. In this latter stage, the visionary character of the apostle strengthens contempt for the body leading to Docetism.

2.2 *Peter as the New Hero of a Community of the Margin*

Concerning Peter's figure, the Coptic *Apocalypse of Peter* takes a step further from the Greek *Apocalypse of Peter* or the *Gospel of Peter*: the text confirms that the apostle is the true hero of a community of the margin, and not as the glorious leader of the whole church. It begins with a rewriting of the episode of Peter's confession. In the synoptic Gospels, the passage does not end well. Jesus rebukes Peter and calls him Satan. On the contrary, the *Apocalypse of Peter* says:

You too Peter, become in accordance to your name, perfect, just like me, the one who has chosen you. For with you I have made a start for the others whom I have called to knowledge. Therefore, be strong until the imitator of the righteousness of him who called you before – he called you so that you would know him in the worthy way, with respect to the distance that separates (?) him and the nerves of his hands and his feet and the crowning by the ones of the Middle and his body of light – to his likeness (?) in hope of a service because of an earning of honor, as if he is about to reprove (?) you three times in this night.¹⁹

Peter is introduced as the first one of a group of disciples, but not as the foundation stone of the church. He is instead a forerunner, a pioneer of the true knowledge. 'Imitator of justice' or 'imitator of the righteousness' is an expression found elsewhere that designates the Jesus of the Gospels who dies on the cross.²⁰ His passion (the tearing of the nerves, the crown of thorns) will reveal to Peter the true *gnosis*. The Matthean account being rewritten, the mission given to Peter by the Risen One changes its meaning: in this specific community, the revelation of the truth leads to understand that the Jesus of the flesh was a mere simulacrum. The triple denial also radically evolves: it becomes a denial of the carnal nature, and therefore the acknowledgment of the spiritual nature.

19 *Apoc. Pet.* 71.15–72.5, translation (slightly revised) Havelaar (1999) 33.

20 Havelaar (1999) 81.

The Savior urges Peter to act ‘in accordance to his name’ (ἡΣΡΑΙΗΜ ΠΕΤΡΑΝ), i.e., as *Petros*, the founding stone; hence, the alternative renaming of Simon, now named τέλειος, ‘perfect’.²¹

Nevertheless, Peter is not ready; he is still carnally frightened by deceptive appearances:

While he said these things, I saw the priests and the people running in our direction with stones, in order to kill us; I was afraid that we would die.²²

Peter’s fear of death demonstrates that the path can be long for the “perfect disciple.” He receives thus a second call from the Savior:

‘Peter, I have told you several times that they are blind ones who have no guide. If you want to understand their blindness, put your hands on the eyes with your cloak and say what you see’. But when I had done this, I did not see anything. I said: ‘No one sees (in this way)’. Again he said to me: ‘Do this once more’. Fear in joy came to me for I saw a new light brighter than the light of day. After that, it came down on the Savior. And I told him what I had seen.

[...] And I listened to the priests while they were sitting with the scribes. The crowds were screaming with their voice. When he had heard these things from me, he said to me: ‘Prick up the ears of your head and listen to the things they say’. And I listened again (and) said: ‘You are glorified while you are sitting’.²³

The whole passage is built on the opposition between seeing and hearing: what can be seen or heard has no consistency. When you hide your eyes, you can see the glory of the Lord; you can watch his epiphany. When the ear is closed, the murmur of praise can be distinguished. The believer, and Peter his representative, is invited to see and hear beyond the real world: this is for him the only way to glimpse the true nature of the Savior, the Pleroma. The verb **†** *εοογ* (to glorify) is used six times by the *Apocalypse of Peter* in connection with a Pleromatic situation.²⁴

²¹ We revised the translation of H. Havelaar following the suggestion of Smith (1985) 132.

²² *Apoc. Pet.* 72.5–9, translation Havelaar (1999) 33.

²³ *Apoc. Pet.* 72.10–73.17, translation Havelaar (1999) 33–5.

²⁴ Havelaar (1999) 85.

In this way, the apostle was prepared for what he would experience shortly, later on, that day: the arrest and crucifixion.

Be strong, because you are the one to whom these mysteries are given to know them openly, that the one who was nailed is the firstborn and the house of the demons [...]. But he who stands near him is the living Savior, he who was in him before, (in) the one who was seized and he was released, while he is standing gladly because he sees that those who have treated him violently, are divided among themselves. Therefore, he laughs about their inability to see. For he knows that they are born blind.²⁵

The key feature of this account is the distinction between the suffering Jesus and the impassible Savior. The Savior is an agent of the Father, whereas the fleshly body of Jesus is connected to 'a house of demons' (the gap prevents the reader to understand this expression better). Above the cross, the living Savior laughs at their blindness. In this distinction between the two bodies, we should not read the later orthodox Christology of the "two natures":²⁶ the corporal body does not designate the human one. It is instead a trick, a trap to deceive the false brethren:

For many will be partakers of the beginning of our word but they will turn themselves to them again, according to the will of the Father.²⁷

Apparently, the Petrine Christians believed that they lived in a world dominated by cosmic evil rulers and that the other Christians compromise themselves with these evil powers. Do they mean this genuinely, or is it a polemical way of speaking? As shown by the quotation, the opponents in the text are not Pagans nor Jews, nor external enemies, but Christians who at first were "true believers," or "false brethren." The enemy comes from the inside. The end of the *Apocalypse* is particularly interesting. The text reads ⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲧⲁⲩⲭⲟⲟⲩ ⲁⲩⲱⲱⲛⲉ ⲉⲣⲁⲓ ⲛⲉⲅⲧⲓ. Most of the editors translate by 'when he had said these things, he came to his senses'. The literal meaning of the expression is slightly different, 'having spoken; he becomes in himself'. The expression is strange in Coptic and can translate the Greek ἐγένετο ἐν αὐτῷ, who express the process of "coming conscious", coming back to earth, awakening. The sense of the expression can

25 *Apoc. Pet.* 82.18–83.3 translation Havelaar (1999) 49–51.

26 Luttikhuisen (2003) 194.

27 *Apoc. Pet.* 73.23–26 translation Havelaar (1999) 35.

be ‘He came to himself’,²⁸ *i.e.*, he came to his *true* self. The amphibology is deliberate. When reality is not in the awakening state but in the vision, the vision becomes a reality. Coming back to oneself does not consist in the awakening but in the ecstasy.

3 Peter Seen by Opponents: the Persistence of an Old Image

Ineke Sluiter, in her article “Anchoring innovation” highlights a cognitive practice in which modernity is embedded in or attached to what is older, traditional and familiar. She also demonstrates that the concept is ambivalent. An anchor can be a way to cling to the past to support novelty. But it can also be a link created by nostalgia or fear of the future, which hinders innovation. Here, the ideological innovation of marginalized communities is rooted in a valued past reflected in the biblical substratum. Peter is this anchor which makes it possible to “connect” the novelty to the time of Jesus. But an anchor can also be a way to resist the flow of change. To secure themselves, people keep memories of little details, in order to get the impression that nothing can change. They are some inliers – to use a different comparison from the one Sluiter borrows from the naval world –, some witnesses of a forgone past.

In the case of Peter, the wind of change may have initially been blowing towards the marginal communities mentioned above, but from the 4th century onwards, it was blowing over larger churches, which were more influential and more institutionalized communities. They imposed the image of the aforementioned “first pope.”

The tracks of the old figure of the visionary were kept in the discourse of the pagan opponents. That is to be expected. Opponents or outsiders always tend to stick to old images to make their caricatures more effective. This is the method used by contemporary TV series when they seek to depict the Catholic Church as an oppressive and threatening institution: they multiply the frightening but utterly anachronistic figures of priests in cassocks kissing the ring of scary prelates. The attestations of the criticism of the non-Christian opponents against Peter are thus scarce but confirm the lasting of Peter’s old image of a visionary.²⁹ At first, the apostle could be confused with his master Jesus. Phlegon of Tralles (2nd c.), a freedman of Hadrian attributed some of Peter’s deeds to

²⁸ Luttikhuisen (2003) 197.

²⁹ All references in Harnack (1922). See also: de Labriolle (1948); Ruggiere (2002).

Jesus: ‘some things which really happened to Peter happened to Jesus’;³⁰ Origen says. Celsus (2nd c.), on the contrary, does not make the confusion and introduced Peter as a seer, because of his vision of the resurrected Jesus:³¹

A hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery, who either dreamt in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion (an experience which has happened to thousands), or, which is more likely, wanted to impress the others by telling this fantastic tale, and so by this cock-and-bull story to provide a chance for other beggars.³²

The ‘other one’ to be compared to the hysteria (γυνή πάροιστρος) of Mary of Magdala is indeed Peter, accused of being a daydreamer (κατά τινα διάθεσιν όνειρώξας), a wild-eyed psychic (πεπλανημένη φαντασιωθείς), and, eventually, a liar telling fantastic tales (τερατεία). All these features belong to the construction of a derogatory image of a visionary.

Porphyry († 305), in his treatise *Against the Christians* (conserved in Macarius’s *Apocriticus* 3.19–22)³³ chiefly based his criticism of Christianity on the New Testament (mainly *Matthew* and *Acts*, but also *Galatians*). His critic struggles against the “pillar” apostles, Peter and Paul, because he seems to consider crucial the destruction of their reputations to wipe out the claims of an emergent Catholic Christianity.³⁴ He also knows the above-mentioned *Apocalypse of Peter*, a clear piece of evidence of the permanence of Peter as a seer.

The extant excerpts of the treatise from Emperor Julian *Against the Galileans* keep only one mention of the Apostle, a passage full of caustic irony against the vision of the animals from the *Acts of the Apostles*.

Now if, after the vision of Peter, the pig has now taken to chewing the cud, then let us obey Peter; for it is in very truth a miracle if, after the vision of Peter, it has taken to that habit. But if he spoke falsely when he said that he saw this revelation – to use your own way of speaking – in the house of the tanner, why are we so ready to believe him in such important matters?

30 συγχυθείς έν τοίς περι Πέτρον ώς περι του Ιησου. Origen, *Cels.* 2.14, translation in Chadwick (1980) 81.

31 Koschorke (1978) 51; O’Collins (2012).

32 *Cels.* 2.55, translation in Chadwick (1980) 109.

33 Hoffmann (1994) 53–7.

34 Hoffmann (1994) 172.

Was it so hard a thing that Moses enjoined on you when, besides the flesh of swine, he forbade you to eat winged things and things that dwell in the sea, and declared to you that besides the flesh of swine these had also been cast out by God and shown to be impure?³⁵

Julian, known to be benevolent towards the Jews,³⁶ blames the Christians for abandoning the Law on the basis of stupid visions which occurred in the humble house of a tanner. The Christians are portrayed as gullible dupes naively believing in Peter's fancies.

This mockery of the visionary figure is sometimes combined with disdain of Peter's intellectual abilities. This aristocratic contempt towards the humble origin of the Galilean fisherman is another way to discredit him. Since the former craftsman could not master any intellectual subtlety, he could only rely on his ability to tell lies. Celsus made use of the argument:

Jesus collected round him ten or eleven infamous men, the most wicked tax collectors and sailors and with these fled hither and thither, gathering a means of livelihood in a disgraceful and importunate way. Let us now deal with this as well as we can. It is evident to readers of the gospels, which Celsus does not appear even to have read that Jesus chose twelve apostles, of whom only Matthew was a tax collector. Those whom he muddles together as sailors are probably James and John since they left the ship and their father Zebedee and followed Jesus. For Peter and his brother Andrew, who earned the necessities of life with a fishing net, are to be reckoned not among sailors, but, as the Bible says, among fishermen.³⁷

The Proconsul of Bithynia Sossianus Hierocles (4th c.), in his *Φιλαλήθης λόγος* makes the same claim, according to Lactantius:

He laid into Paul and Peter especially, and into the other disciples, as “disseminators of falsehood,” claiming that they were also “untrained and uneducated, since some of them made a living as fishermen”: was he put out because fishing had had no commentary from an Aristophanes or an Aristarchus?³⁸

35 Julianus, *Contra Galilaeos* 314D–E. Translation: Wright (1913) 409.

36 Aziza (1978); Teitler (2017) 25–6.

37 *Cels.* 1.61. Translation in Chadwick (1980) 56–7.

38 *Div. Inst.*, 5.2.17, translation in Bowen & Garnsey (2003) 286. See de Labriolle (1948) 307–9.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the readings of these texts, a historical one, and a hermeneutical one. Historically, they witness the alternative reconstruction of the memories of the Apostle Peter by a Syrian group.³⁹ Anchored in the remembrance of Peter's visionary abilities that probably strengthened their own ecstatic experiences, this Syrian Group gradually came into conflict with other Christian groups. The fact that *their* "patron saint" was also appropriated by these groups as the founding stone of their church may have triggered their hostility. For them, this *appropriation* may have been an unbearable expropriation. Does this prove that they were lapsing into heresy? It is an open question. The fact that pagans took over their image of Peter may have speeded up the process. Unfortunately, there is not enough historical evidence to prove it. Traces of the anti-Christian polemic are scarce and do not disclose their sources.

Hermeneutically, the history of the reception of Peter is a case study. It shows that the construction of a biblical figure is a selection of a few distinct features of the literary character. And according to the choice made, the result can be utterly different. If you rely upon the declaration of Jesus on the power of the keys, you build an authoritative and pontifical figure of Peter, but if you focus on the Transfiguration and the Protophany, you get the figure of the seer. Same historical character, different figures.

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39 See also Bockmuehl (2003); Norelli (1991).

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