

The Papacy and the Historian II:

Peter et al

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The historical study of the papacy begins with Peter and the study of Peter can only be undertaken in a scriptural context. I use the word 'scriptural' advisedly. Only if one gives the New Testament a special status as part of 'Scripture' does it make sense to sift its texts relating to Peter in the way traditionally done. Now one cannot accord the New Testament documents the status of Scripture on scholarly criteria alone. Scholarship has a very important part to play but it is necessarily subsidiary and incomplete.

It is conceivable, though after the last few generations of international scrutiny improbable, that evidence might come to light, or some great scholar notice something previously missed, that would make it intellectually impossible to accord the texts we have scriptural status. It is conceivable that a scholar might demonstrate that the thought of the New Testament and the language that went with the thought were impossible for the first century AD, as Lorenzo Valla did with the *Constitutum Constantini*. But after a century of scholarship trying to demonstrate just this, we are left with texts, all almost certainly originally written in the first century and therefore much nearer the autographs than any Latin or Greek classical texts, that so far as scholarship can tell are 'authentic'. But this has only negative value. It means it is not intellectually disreputable to take them as texts of the time and place they purport to come from. It means that arguments of the kind one still meets that there is no evidence that Jesus ever lived can only be accepted if the same criteria be applied generally and it be freely admitted that there is no evidence that Julius Ceasar ever lived, or that Cicero wrote a line in his life—if he ever had one—or that there ever was a people called the Germans. It means that the literary form of the documents and the intentions behind them are sufficiently intelligible to make arguments of the kind that the texts convey hidden meaning, commending the consumption of mushrooms or recommending particular if not peculiar sexual practices, plausible only to those with a disposition to believe this sort of thing. Anyone can see that these texts are as far from the world of the dafter poems of Blake and Yeats as one could possibly get. But that is all it does mean.

Scholarship cannot make me or anyone else take the texts seriously. They centre on the life and death of Jesus. I can only take this as relevant to me and everyone else—I cannot take it to be the one without

the other—if I accept the claim that Jesus was God and his death has the power to give life to every living person. I am asked to believe that the career of this man has the power and the effect of completely redefining the meaning of life and death in such a way that one must lay aside as mistaken what direct experience of life and death seems to show. No document, or rather no scholarly study of any document, can prove this, make it plausible. Even if one could go behind the documents and move in the company of their authors and could hear with one's own ears the women's account of the empty tomb or the disciples' stories of seeing the risen Lord, one would still have to decide if one believes it, or them, or not. It is no concern of mine to carry this argument further or to offer arguments as to why I, or anyone else, should believe these things. But I do want to insist that unless one does, it makes no sense to talk of the texts as part of Scripture. That is I want to reject entirely the validity, even the seriousness, of the approach associated with Rudolf Bultmann. This seems to me to accept, from an inherited and quite uncritical traditional faith, the notion that **the New Testament is Scripture and that therefore one can then, without any concern for one's faith, purge them, interpret them to the point of re-writing them, so that one finishes up, rather like Boccaccio's virgin, without any visible effect on one's spiritual condition.** Bultmann's religion comes from his upbringing re-interpreted in the light of Heidegger. It does not come from the New Testament. Any document which told so many lies as the New Testament does on Bultmann's reading cannot be taken seriously on any point whatsoever. The fact that some things are preserved and thought to be very true is no more a defence than it would be to defend the Protocols of the Elders of Zion because they say Jews are circumcised and they are, aren't they?

It only makes sense, then, to look at what the New Testament has to say about Peter if one is scrutinising what Scripture has to say about Peter. Up to a point, since Scripture is contained in literary texts, the scrutiny must be conducted in a literary and scholarly way—since these are old texts employing language and forms of thought now recoverable only with an effort. But to say that what one is studying is Scripture means that one is doing something much more than is involved in the study of any other kind of literary text. It is a matter of scrutinising the mind of God, in so far as he has revealed it in intelligible form to us, and consequently theology will never be far away. This is especially so when we look at Peter.

I propose to be summary with almost all the critical part of the question since that has been dealt with often enough by others far more qualified than I am. No one now denies that Peter always had a special, a pre-eminent position amongst the disciples, that he was in some sense the leading man after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and that he visited Rome, probably towards the end of his life, lived there only a few months, and was martyred there, being possibly, though not so far as I can see probably, buried on the site of St

Peter's. One need only refer to Oscar Cullmann's classical study of Peter. But if one is concerned about the claim of the papacy to the succession of Peter certain points need to be discussed.

The key text is Matthew 16, 13-21, where Peter specifically acknowledges Jesus as the Christ, is hailed in turn as the Rock on which that Christ will build his *ekklesia* and promised, or as events turned out, threatened with the gift of the keys of the kingdom and the power to bind and loose. So long as *ekklesia* was translated as Church and given its customary connotation the authenticity of the saying could be challenged. That kind of sense of Church is not elsewhere found in the New Testament and it is very improbable that a prophetic vision of the Church as it was to become centuries later—and the evidence is clear enough that Jesus did not have that kind of fore-knowledge—would have made any sense to either Jesus or the disciples in that situation. It is precisely because the apostolic age is unique, that age to which everything has to be referred back, the Church being essentially the group that does the referring and finds its identity in the act of referral and its results, that the idea of a Church would have made little sense to the disciples. The Church was a discovery of the successors to the apostles and it is a discovery that will not be complete until the end of time. It is important to realise, then, that what makes it clear that Mat. 16 is an authentic saying of Jesus, also informs us that the traditional understanding of the saying will no longer do. But before we look at what *ekklesia* means in this context we need to look a little closer at the occasion of the exchange.

There is no agreement as to the occasion Jesus renamed Peter or as to how and when he related this re-naming to the foundation of the *ekklesia*. I want to argue that Matthew is correct: that the confession and the re-naming belong together on the not very subtle or scholarly grounds that the re-naming of Peter makes no sense at all without an acknowledgement by the poor man who has fallen for the job of being a foundation stone of a so far putative *ekklesia*, whatever that was, that the creator of the *ekklesia* was the promised Messiah. *Ekklesia*, the soubriquet Peter, the notion of a foundation, the keys of the kingdom are all dependent on the Jewish tradition of an expected Messiah, or rather on the advent of that Messiah in the person of Jesus. The great virtue of Matthew's presentation is that he realises all this very clearly and puts it altogether. What is more he says that this clarity and this understanding is due to the words of the Lord himself and his careful choice of an appropriate *Sitz in Leben* to hammer the point home. One of the weaknesses of current biblical scholarship, it seems to me, is that scholars concentrate so much on the authors of the Gospels and their intentions that they underrate the intelligence of Jesus himself and do not always give full weight to his intentions, which are, after all, what we read the Gospels to find out. Few now deny the authenticity of the remark Matthew attributes to Jesus, what is questioned is the collocation, but that would mean that Peter was renamed before the promise of an *ekklesia* and therefore the renaming would communicate nothing until the *ekklesia* was announced and

Peter's special place in it defined, and this does not seem to me to be Jesus's way.

The real reasons why scholars are chary of taking Matthew at its face value are a mixture of scholarship and theology. There is nothing wrong in this provided one is clear which is which. Most scholars suppose Mark to be a source of Matthew: those scholars who still wish to preserve the priority of Matthew do not, as a rule, maintain the priority of the 'Greek' Matthew, that is the one we have and the only one anyone has ever laid eyes on, but posit a lost aramaic Matthew, which itself was a source of Mark. Either way it is easy to argue that Mark who mentions Peter's profession of faith, whether the earliest source for that profession or deriving from an aramaic Matthew, is earlier in time than 'Greek' Matthew. In addition John 1, 42 seems to say Jesus renamed Peter on first meeting him.

The evidence of John is interesting: it also connects the naming of Peter with the recognition of Jesus as Messiah. In this case Andrew tells his brother, the future Peter but the then Simon bar Jonah: 'We have found the Christ', and brings him to Jesus. Jesus calls Simon, son of John and hails him as you who are to be called Cephas, i.e., Rock, or Peter. John does not say Jesus immediately named him Peter but indicated that at some point he was to be re-named. The incident cannot have meant much to Peter at the time but it is not difficult to see why John mentions this much less important hint of the re-naming whilst omitting all mention of the actual re-naming. John's Gospel is a late NT writing composed when the *ekklesia* was truly in process of formation and the age of the Apostles, when the curious or puzzled could ask Peter himself about his new name or the Beloved Disciple about what happened at the Last Supper, was fast receding. John knows his readers are likely to know something of Paul's epistles and the other Gospels. For new or recent Christians it wasn't obvious, as it is to us because of the theological controversies of our own day, that Simon bar Jonah, or son of John, Cephas to use Paul's usual usage, and Peter were all the same person. John makes this clear at the very beginning of his Gospel and some of his original readership were no doubt very grateful for the information. But what John does show is that the impression one might get from Matthew that Peter first realised Jesus was Messiah and first expressed the idea is mistaken. The belief that he was indeed the expected Messiah was a major motive in the response of several of the disciples to Jesus's call. In the light of this Mark's version is, as it stands, curiously incomplete. Jesus knows perfectly well that his disciples think he is the Messiah. If we take Mark as complete as it stands Jesus merely inquires what do men (i.e. outsiders, not the disciples) say about me and Peter informs him there are divergencies of opinion but on being asked directly says he thinks Jesus is the Messiah. But why Jesus should ask such a question at all is not obvious. He must know perfectly well, if John is to be believed, who they think he is, from their behaviour if not from explicit comment. Matthew makes clear why Jesus should ask this question and why it was important that Peter replied what they all thought. On

Matthew's version Jesus prompts Peter's 'confession' in order to say something new, original, and important, about what he, Jesus, has come to do, found an *ekklesia*. On Mark's version—and also Luke's which is almost identical—there is just a pointless question without apparent context.

The traditional explanation of Mark's brevity was, of course, the **humility of Peter, since Mark is traditionally associated with Peter**. Modern scholarship is inclined to suppose Mark's Gospel was written in Rome 'as an echo of Peter's catechesis'. (P. Benoit, *Jesus and the Gospel*, London, 1974, ii, p. 134, the argument is weakened if, like Père Benoit, one believes in an Aramaic Matthew as the principal source of Mark.) Dr Cullmann has shown how Peter learnt his lesson after the denial and the crucifixion and in the first sermon of all presents Jesus as the suffering servant, implicitly rejecting the triumphant charismatic leader view of the Messiah, laying stress on his expiatory and salvific death. (Père Benoit denies theological merit of any consequence to Peter for this because it isn't original as 'this doctrine goes back to Christ himself', *op. cit.*, p. 158. It seems to me that originality is a virtue in theologians only insofar as what they teach goes back to Christ himself. It is perfectly obvious that the whole future of the Church and the history of salvation depended on Peter grasping this point.) Thus modern scholarship does give some force to the old point about Peter's humility. It offers a sensible, even a plausible, explanation of why Mark omits what Matthew affirms. But even more to the point, Mark is probably the first Gospel, it is a Roman Gospel, and a Petrine Gospel. Was it necessary to do more than quote Peter's 'confession' as a reminder to a public entirely familiar with the circumstances of Peter's re-naming?

When we turn to Luke 22, 31-2 and especially the Feed my Sheep passage from John 21, 5-7, it is hard not to think that the Jesus's saying in Matthew 16 is presupposed in both cases. Only Matthew, however, supplies a context for the saying and one, moreover, that makes sense and settles difficulties, which is more than can be said for either Dr Cullmann's proposed alternative occasions for the saying, or Père Benoit's.

Now let us look at what is meant by *ekklesia*. 'Ekklesis' is a word with strong semitic roots. It owes nothing to any sense derived from Roman or Greek institutional thought. Its sense is perfectly expressed in Acts, 7, 38, in Stephen's speech before martyrdom when he speaks of Moses being in the *ekklesia* in the wilderness with the angel. The word is rare in the NT, but frequent enough in the Septuagint where it always means, as in Acts, the chosen people with special reference to their redemption by God. One of the things we have learnt from the Dead Sea Scrolls is that in Jesus's lifetime the notion was prevalent that the chosen people as a whole had proved unfaithful and various small groups were claiming for themselves the identity of the true chosen people. The notion had, of course, impeccable biblical precedent in the *topos* of the faithful remnant. In Matthew 16, Peter, being asked, says Jesus is the Messiah of Jewish tradition, but that tradition

is inseparable from the idea of a messianic-led community. This is why Peter, who was plainly not lacking in courage, denied Christ when he saw the Messiah, far from leading, being led, to judgement and execution. So to call Jesus messiah is to imply he was to lead a new or at least purified chosen people. The disciples can hardly have avoided thinking of themselves as founder-members of the new community and the kind of privilege they expected must have been cast in OT terms, i.e. as prophets, or as analogous to the prophets and judges of the original Israel. When Jesus asked the disciples who men said he was, he applied to himself, according to Matthew, the notion of the Son of Man. 'Who do men say the Son of Man is?' This refers back to Daniel for whom the Son of Man represented the people of the Saints (Dan. 7, 18, 27). So the idea of a Messiah is that of a leader of some kind and a leader of a specially singled out community, a new chosen people, the *ekklesia*.

The Messiah, again, was very close to the notion of Yahweh himself and the disciples must have been soon familiar with the intimacy and familiarity Jesus claimed towards the traditionally remote, awful, and vengeful God of Jewish tradition. Did not this Jesus not only refer to this God as *Abba*, our dad, but presumed to give them permission to follow suit? Consequently, in Matthew 16, Jesus claims to be the Son of Man, is hailed as Messiah—and accepts the title—and then perfectly naturally refers to his new chosen people and names Simon bar Jonah as the rock on which it is to be founded, so that Simon's name is replaced by his new epithet. To the disciples the naming must have recalled the formation of the first chosen people and the re-naming of Abraham. Peter is thus a new Abraham.

It seems to me that to translate *ekklesia* in Matthew 16 as church, still worse as Church, is as much a solecism as it would be to translate the earlier passage as thou art the Pope. What Jesus said is: 'On this rock I will build my new chosen people'. This is an important point, and one with important consequences for the claim of the papacy to be the successors of Peter. Dr Cullmann is quite right to say in my opinion, that no notion of a papal succession can be read into this passage. Peter is unique, just as Abraham was unique. He will have successors, as Abraham had successors, but the form that succession will take is neither prescribed nor envisaged in Matthew 16. Père Benoit's well-known criticism of Cullmann's thesis seems to depend on substituting Church for *ekklesia*. Père Benoit writes that Jesus clearly nominated Peter 'to continue on earth his mission to govern the Messianic people. This is a unique but permanent mission, which cannot come to an end as long as there is a flock to lead, a house to keep firm on its foundations and to administer' (my italics) (*op. cit.*, p. 152). But it could be said of Abraham that he had a unique but permanent mission, etc., his successors were prophets and judges and even kings; nothing like the continuous institution Père Benoit quite gratuitously reads into Matthew 16 is necessarily entailed by the notion of *ekklesia* and it is wildly improbable that Peter, the disciple, or Jesus himself, had that kind of vision of the future community and the shape it would take.

We cannot read the equation of the papacy with the Petrine succession into Matthew 16, or any other Petrine text. The claims of the papacy to the succession do not rest on biblical grounds but on what I call theological grounds and Père Benoit calls Tradition. The next stage of the argument then moves away from Scripture to theology but first let me summarise the argument from Scripture.

The notion of *ekklesia* is OT and semitic not Roman or Greek and has no whiff of the sense of a corporation of any kind about it. The creation of an *ekklesia*, a new chosen people, is implicit in the functions of the Messiah when he comes, just as his is Jahweh-like behaviour. Simon bar Jonah is newly dubbed the rock on which the *ekklesia* is to be built, the new Abraham. Some hints of what is involved are given, the Rock also gets the keys of the Kingdom, which as Père Benoit rightly points out implies a kind 'of Major-domo in the House of God'. Further, if one takes Matthew 16 as essentially correct then Peter is personally made 'major-domo', this cannot be one of those occasions when Peter is simply the spokesman for the other disciples. It must have been obvious immediately that the *ekklesia* was bound to differ in some ways from its model, the chosen people of Abraham, Isaac and Moses. But in no way can it be inferred from what is said in the Gospels that the new chosen people will take the shape we should recognise as a Church. The *ekklesia* will have to include men and women not of the circumcision, and the fall of Jerusalem will have to create the experience of a *diaspora*, before what is new and strange about the *ekklesia* can be seen. It will in other words need the experience and the concept of Catholicity before the shape of the *ekklesia* is revealed.