

The Background to First and Second Peter

The four Gospels present Simon Peter as the most prominent, impulsive, and ultimately restored leader among the twelve disciples of Yeshua. In that light, he is probably the one that we can relate to the most today.

He was a Galilean fisherman from Bethsaida who worked with his brother Andrew and business partners James and John. After being introduced to Yeshua by Andrew and experiencing a miraculous catch of fish on the Sea of Galilee, Peter was invited by Yeshua to become a “fisher of men,” prompting him to leave his career behind. Peter, James, and John formed Yeshua’s inner circle who witnessed exclusive events like the Transfiguration and the raising of Jairus’s daughter.

Peter was the one who experienced both great faith and sudden fear by stepping out of a boat to walk on the Sea of Galilee toward Yeshua, but began sinking when he lost focus, before Yeshua helped him back on the boat. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter was the first to explicitly declare that Yeshua was “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mat. 16:16). But he would also boast that he would die before deserting Yeshua, and yet, while Yeshua was on trial, Peter denied knowing Yeshua three times.

The ultimate spiritual turning point in his life took place in John 21, when the resurrected Yeshua met Peter by the Sea of Galilee and asked him “Do you love me?” three times—matching the three denials—and commanded him to “Feed my sheep,” thus restoring his purpose. The evidence of that restoration came a short time later on the day of Shavuot (Pentecost), when, as recorded in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples and Peter changed from a man in to a bold evangelist who immediately preached to thousands.

He, then, played a prominent role in the spreading of the Good News in the first half of the book of Acts. In particular, God gave Peter a vision in Acts 10 that taught Peter that Gentiles were kosher or fit for fellowship and receiving the Gospel.

Peter’s relationship with Paul was also significant. After resolving a theological difference of opinion, as recorded in Galatians 2:11-14, they became united in their dedication to the gospel, as evidenced by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

Paul wrote his letter to the Roman believers around 57 A.D., but did not arrive there in person until 60 A.D. Paul then spent two years in prison before being released by the emperor Nero. During this period of freedom, Paul likely traveled west to preach in Spain (fulfilling his goal in Romans 15:24) and revisited congregations in Greece and Asia Minor.

It is highly probable that while Paul was away on this final missionary journey, Peter arrived in Rome around 62-63 A.D. and took up leadership of the Roman believers.¹ During this time, Peter was a free man supervising the Roman congregations alongside his coworkers, Silvanus and Mark. That is when Peter served as the primary eyewitness source for the Gospel of Mark.² This was also

¹ This sequence of events explains why Paul did not include Peter in his greetings at the end of his earlier letter to the Romans, and Peter could later state that his first epistle was written from Rome (what he symbolically calls Babylon in 1 Pet 5:13).

² This conclusion is based on the testimony of Papias of Hierapolis, a second-century bishop (circa 60–130 A.D.) who sat under the teachings of the Apostle John. According to Papias: “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately. . . whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. . . For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely” (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 3.39.15). According to Papias and later Church Fathers like Irenaeus, when Peter preached to Roman audiences, Mark compiled those episodic memories into a cohesive book—essentially making the Gospel of Mark “The Memoirs of Peter.” That explains why Mark’s gospel is uniquely fast-paced, and action-oriented, which perfectly mirrors a fisherman’s raw, spoken recollection.

when Peter wrote his first epistle.

First Peter is a circular letter sent to various believing communities scattered across the northern Roman provinces of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), including Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. The audience consisted of a mixed demographic but were predominantly Gentiles. Peter repeatedly addresses them as “exiles” and “aliens”. Because they abandoned their former pagan lifestyles and civic idolatry, their Greek and Roman neighbors treated them with severe social exclusion and verbal harassment. He wrote to prepare them for a coming “fiery ordeal” (1 Peter 4:12), showing that while social hostility was high, systematic state-sponsored arrests had not yet been fully materialized.

According to 1 Peter 5:12, he used Silvanus as a highly skilled secretary called an amanuensis to write the letter. This explains why 1 Peter is written in an elevated style of literary Greek, which would have been uncommon for a Galilean fisherman.

Meanwhile, in the summer of 64 A.D., the Great Fire of Rome devastated the capital. Emperor Nero deflected public blame onto the Christian community, officially initiating the Roman Empire’s first systematic, brutal persecution of believers. Roman authorities, acting under imperial decrees, began systematically tracking down and arresting Christian leaders for “subversion” and arson. While traveling, Paul was apprehended as a leader of what the state now viewed as an illegal cult. He was sent back to Rome in chains around 65 or 66 A.D. Likewise, as the primary figurehead of this supposed cult, Peter became a high-priority target for the Praefectura Urbis (the Roman palace of justice). Unlike his arrest decades earlier, which was ordered by King Herod Agrippa I, when Peter miraculously escaped (Acts 12:3-11), his final arrest in Nero’s Rome was an ordeal he could not escape.

Christian tradition and historical records strongly point to both Peter and Paul spending their final months in the Mamertine Prison, located near the Roman Forum. In contrast to Paul’s first stay in Rome, which allowed him to rent a private home under light guard, this final chapter was bleak and severe, for they were confined to a dark, subterranean dungeon that was reserved for high-profile enemies of the state awaiting execution.

In his final letter, written from this cell (2 Timothy), Paul laments the biting cold, begs Timothy to bring a cloak before winter, and notes that almost all of his close associates have abandoned him due to the extreme danger. Peter also occupied the same grim space, where his second and final epistle was composed. The content reflects his awareness that his execution was imminent (2 Pet 1:14). And, unlike his first letter, 2 Peter does not mention Silvanus or any other scribe assisting him. Historical scholars note that the Greek text of 2 Peter is much rougher, urgent, and unpolished compared to 1 Peter. This perfectly matches the setting of an aging Galilean fisherman writing from a dark, cramped Roman dungeon without anyone to help him.

The ultimate overlap of Peter and Paul is found in their deaths. Ancient tradition firmly holds that both apostles were martyred in Rome on the exact same day (June 29 of 67 A.D.). Their deaths reflected their legal standings. According to church historians, because Paul was protected by his Roman citizenship from crucifixion, he was spared the cross and instead beheaded on the Ostian Way (now the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls). Peter, on the other hand, was sentenced to the death of a non-citizen and was crucified upside down at Nero’s Circus (now the site of St. Peter’s Basilica) because he deemed himself unworthy to die in the same manner as Yeshua.

A recurring theme of Peter’s writings is a reflection of both his personal experience and what he witnessed in regard to Yeshua, namely that Yeshua’s unjust suffering and subsequent resurrection is the ultimate template for how a believer should endure trials.