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A. R. C. Leaney

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'Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 1: 1)

Simon Peter, also known as Cephas, the spokesman of the disciples in the gospels, is the chief of the twelve apostles in the early chapters of Acts. There he takes the lead in the election of Matthias into Judas's place (1: 15), addresses the crowd after the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (2: 1-40), heals a lame man at the 'Beautiful Gate' (3: 1-10), and speaks forcefully to the crowd which gathers round (3: 12-26). He and John (son of Zebedee) are twice brought before the Sanhedrin for healing and preaching in Jesus's name (4: 7-22 and 5: 18, 27-42), on the second of these two occasions being set free on the advice of Gamaliel (5: 33-9). When the church moves outwards, the Holy Spirit persuades Peter by a dream at Joppa and by his experience at Caesarea in the house of the centurion Cornelius that 'God has no favourites, but that in every nation the man who is godfearing and does what is right is acceptable to him' (10: 34 f.). Peter defends this visit to Cornelius when he returns to Jerusalem (11: 1-18). At some time between A.D. 41 and 44 King Herod (Agrippa I) 'beheaded James...' and 'proceeded to arrest Peter' (Acts 12: 2 f.) but Peter was miraculously delivered from prison (12: 6-17). We do not know the exact date; Agrippa's death is recorded in the same chapter and we know this happened in A.D. 44, but we do not know how long after Peter's escape Herod Agrippa died. It was after he had resided 'for a time at Caesarea' (12: 20). This is vague, and there are difficulties about understanding

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Peter's movements. When he left Jerusalem (12: 17) he was a fugitive from prison. It is hard to see how he could be back in the city without any explanation, as in Acts 15. Perhaps his journeys, recorded in Acts 9: 32 ('a general tour'), to Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea, when he met Cornelius, really took place *after* he left Jerusalem; and perhaps this was when 'Cephas' (i.e. Peter) 'came to Antioch' (Gal. 2: 11) and was rebuked there by Paul for going back on the liberal position towards the Gentiles which he had so recently learnt was the teaching of the Holy Spirit. He seems at first to have believed that 'God has no favourites' (Acts 10: 34), for 'until certain persons came from James he was taking his meals with gentile Christians; but when they came he drew back and began to hold aloof' (Gal. 2: 12), so he seems not quite to have had the courage of his own convictions. If we study the problems raised by the Acts of the Apostles we find that it is not easy to decide when the council related in Acts 15 took place, and especially how and when James became the head of the church at Jerusalem. If the council is out of its proper place in the story, or if Peter was not really present at it, we can imagine that he left Jerusalem after escaping from prison and never returned. This would be how he came to visit not only Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea and Antioch, but also perhaps Corinth; for there was a group at Corinth who said, referring to him by the other form of his name, 'I follow Cephas' (1 Cor. 1: 12), and Paul speaks of him as travelling with his Christian wife (1 Cor. 9: 5).

We do not know the name of Peter's wife or anything about her except that Jesus healed her mother (Mark 1: 29-31 and parallels). Her story is one of many which it would be most interesting to have, but the ancient world often did not think women important enough to mention, and Luke says nothing about her in Acts.

She may well have been with Peter in Rome, even though she is not mentioned, for that seems to be where Peter was at the end of his life. It is not she but the Church in 'Babylon'

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(i.e. Rome) which is meant in I Peter 5: 13. We shall see that perhaps we ought not to rely on I Pet. 5: 13 as evidence for this, and there is no other evidence in the New Testament that Peter did go to Rome, but we must respect the strong tradition that he did, though its historical foundations are now no longer easy to produce. Clement of Rome, writing his letter to the Corinthians, perhaps about A.D. 96, refers to Peter in a way which many think implies that the apostle had met his death by martyrdom at Rome, but it is not at all clear that Clement means at Rome, since he does not mention any place at all (I Clem. 5: 1–4). The church historian Eusebius (c. 260–340) preserves for us some interesting traditions about Peter and Paul in Rome: he tells us that Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, writing to the Romans (in about A.D. 170), speaks of ‘the planting that came from Peter and Paul’. Planting means founding churches, presumably; but neither Peter nor Paul actually founded the church at Rome. Little is known of its foundation, but it took place early enough for Paul to write his famous letter to the Romans in about A.D. 55. Dionysius says again, ‘...and likewise they taught together also in Italy and were martyred on the same occasion.’ Further, a presbyter of the church at Rome named Caius said he could ‘point out the trophies’ (memorials) ‘of the apostles’. In the passage quoted above, Eusebius also relates the tradition that both apostles were put to death under Nero (*Ecclesiastical History*, 2. 25. 5 ff.). This would be in the barbaric act of cruelty, confined to Rome itself, by which Nero, to get rid of the report that Rome had been fired by his orders, ‘fastened the guilt...on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace’, as Tacitus wrote in his *Annals*, 15: 44. This was in A.D. 64, so if the First Letter really was written by Peter it cannot have been later than that year. But we shall see (pp. 7 ff.) that there are good reasons for holding that the letter was not written by Peter, but in his name by some person who felt it an honour to write on behalf of the church where he was regarded as a founding apostle.

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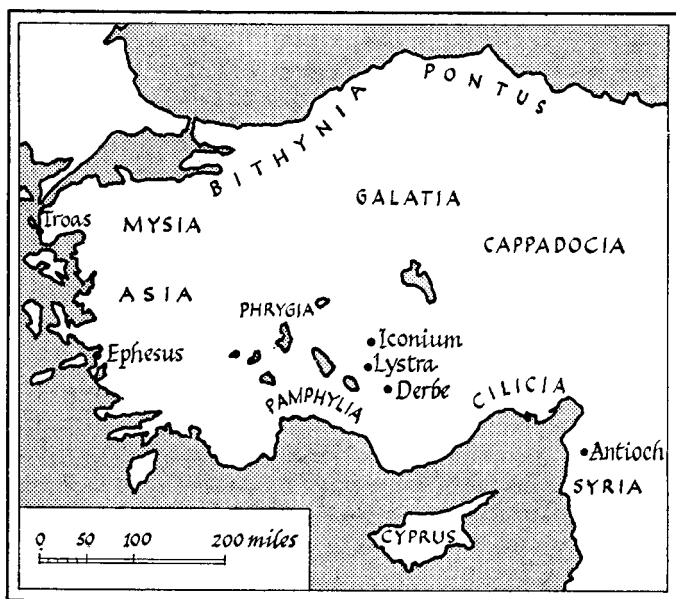
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I PETER

God's scattered people

*'God's scattered people who lodge for a while in Pontus,
Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia'* (1 Pet. 1: 1)

Pontus and *Bithynia* had been united as one province of the Roman Empire since 64 B.C., but there is no evidence of a Christian church there until the governorship of Pliny the Younger in c. A.D. 112. This evidence implies that Christianity had been there for at least twenty years, but not so early that a letter could have been written to an established church there in or before A.D. 64 (the presumed date of Peter's death). *Galatia*, a province including, since 25 B.C., *Pisidia*, *Lycaonia* and *Isauria*, had been evangelized by Paul (Acts 13-14 and the Letter to the Galatians). So had *Asia* (the province in the west of the area usually called *Asia Minor*, which includes all



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those places mentioned here along with Mysia, Lydia and Caria). Ephesus was the capital of Asia (Acts 19, etc.). *Cappadocia*, a province since A.D. 17, is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament only at Acts 2: 9; as one of the places whence those present in Jerusalem at Pentecost had come. It lay immediately north of Cilicia and may have been evangelized from there fairly early, although we have no evidence for this other than the mention here. The districts are all among those which we know Paul to have evangelized or which we may reasonably assume to have received the gospel indirectly through him.

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Peter may have visited the districts listed in verse 1 because it was agreed, as Paul tells us in Gal. 2: 7, that he 'had been entrusted with the Gospel for Jews' and he may have taken the gospel to Jews in these areas; but we have absolutely no other evidence for his having gone there.

When the letter was written, a persecution was evidently in progress against the Christians to whom the letter is addressed. 4: 12 ff. ('the fiery ordeal that is upon you') makes this certain. If Peter wrote it, the persecution in question must be that of A.D. 64, which was confined to Rome. Perhaps Peter wrote to warn his old converts far away of the possibility that it would reach them, and to teach them how to face it; though he might be too preoccupied with the situation in Rome to do even that. Eusebius accepts the First Letter of Peter 'as authentic and accepted by the early Fathers' (*Eccl. Hist.* 3. 3).

There are reasons for doubting whether the letter was literally *from Peter*. The good Greek in which it is written and the quotations from the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) do not suggest the Galilaean fisherman, who was far from illiterate, but is no doubt fairly described in Acts 4: 13 as an 'untrained layman'. It has been argued that the style and some of the thought of the letter are due to the

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Silvanus mentioned at 5: 12, and that he is to be identified with the Silas who was Paul's companion (Acts 15: 27 onwards) and part author of the letters to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1: 1 and 2 Thess. 1: 1). This would be a good argument if we wanted to hold that 1 Peter is a letter of Silvanus; but the more we say that Silvanus's help is the explanation of things which make us doubt that Peter wrote it, the less likely we make it that Peter did write it.

The letter is addressed to people being persecuted; but there is no indication that the writer is (which would be the situation if Peter wrote it). What then was the situation? Let us consider some of the interesting evidence provided by the letter itself. We shall see that perhaps not all of it is—or was originally—a letter. The first clue is that the work makes a stop at 4: 11 with a doxology, an ascription to God of glory and power, like the formal end of a sermon in church. As far as this point, the work is not particularly like a letter, since it does not take up different subjects or answer questions, nor does it betray any controversy or discussion with the readers. It is, on the other hand, an attractive and persuasive discourse, based on the idea that those being exhorted have all been baptized; reminding them of this gives the writer the opportunity to remind them also of their Christian profession. After this point, on the other hand, the work becomes very like a letter, since it refers clearly to an event now in progress, 'the fiery ordeal that is upon you' (4: 12). It is therefore possible that a letter has been added to a work originally much more like a sermon given in church; and the rest of the last part certainly looks much more like an actual letter.

It seems therefore that some person or persons may have sent a discourse—perhaps a favourite sermon—to their Christian brethren on hearing that they were in danger of persecution. These people must have been living in Pontus, Galatia, Cappodocia, Asia and Bithynia. Then 1: 1–2 and 4: 12 — 5: 14 make a 'letter framework' for the main part, which is a sermon enclosed in the letter. By an interesting

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I PETER

chance we know of a situation which this would fit very well: in about A.D. 112 Pliny the governor of Bithynia-Pontus wrote to the emperor Trajan for guidance on a difficult question. The letter is numbered Pliny, *Epp.* 10: 96, and in it Pliny writes as follows:

In investigations of Christians I have never taken part; hence I do not know what is the crime usually punished or investigated...whether punishment attaches to the mere name apart from secret crimes, or to the secret crimes connected with the name. Meantime this is the course I have taken...I asked them whether they were Christians, and if they confessed, I asked them a second and third time with threats of punishment. If they kept to it, I ordered them for execution...those who said that they neither were nor ever had been Christians, I thought it right to let go, since they recited a prayer to the gods at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to your statue...and moreover cursed Christ—things which... those who are really Christians cannot be made to do. Others said that they were Christians and then denied it, explaining that they had been, but had ceased to be such, some three years ago, some a good many years, and a few twenty. They maintained that the amount of their fault or error had been this, that it was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and recite by turns a form of words to Christ as a god; and that they bound themselves with an oath, not for any crime, but not to commit theft or robbery or adultery, not to break their word, and not to deny a deposit when demanded. After this was done, their custom was to depart, and to meet again to take food, but ordinary and harmless food.

Although Pliny asks whether it is a crime merely to be a Christian—‘whether punishment attaches to the mere name’—he makes clear that he did in fact punish people who confessed to being Christians and nothing more wicked than

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that, and in his reply Trajan said he had done the right thing. With this we can compare 1 Pet. 4: 16, addressed to people some of whom at least were in the same province as Pliny's in A.D. 112: '...if anyone suffers as a Christian, he should feel it no disgrace, but confess that name to the honour of God.' A further point is worth making: Pliny speaks of Christians who had renounced their faith as long as twenty years before. He does not say that they recanted under persecution, but it is possible that they did so, and the date would then be roughly the time when Domitian cruelly treated those who refused to worship the emperor, that is, about A.D. 96. It is a widely accepted view that the book of Revelation belongs to that time, its author John being exiled to the island of Patmos for his loyalty to Jesus (in Rev. 1: 9 he says, 'I was on the island called Patmos because I had preached God's word and borne my testimony to Jesus'). In the book of Revelation, Rome is called Babylon (14: 8; 16: 19; 17: 5; and three times in chapter 18); and this is a new departure, for Rome is not in the earlier books of the New Testament regarded as the arch-enemy, if an enemy at all. In Acts, Roman governors sometimes help Paul. Thus, calling Rome by the name Babylon, the great oppressor city of Old Testament times, in 1 Pet. 5: 13, suggests that the work was written relatively late, and it becomes all the more reasonable to suppose that it fits in with the situation found in Bithynia in the time of Pliny.

If this is right, Peter cannot have written the letter, and an important question remains unanswered: why did the writers or writer send their letter or sermon in the name of Peter? The only guess we can make is that Peter was at this time associated with Rome, and that by writing in Peter's name the author meant to suggest that he was writing on behalf of the church there. This is far from impossible, for Eusebius believes that Peter's association with Rome is historical, and dates from about A.D. 60. The evidence for Peter *being believed* to have been in Rome and to have taught there is quite firm

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when we come to a date early in the second century. Eusebius in his first book refers to the tradition in Clement of Alexandria's *Outlines* (towards the end of the second century) that the Gospel according to Mark was written as a result of people who had heard Peter preach in Rome begging Mark to write a summary of this teaching for them. More important, Eusebius says this is confirmed by Papias (A.D. c. 60–130), bishop of Hierapolis (a city of Asia Minor near Colossae—see Col. 4: 13), 'who also points out that Mark is mentioned by Peter in his first epistle, which he is said to have composed in Rome itself, as he himself indicates when he speaks of the city figuratively as Babylon: "Greetings from her who dwells in Babylon, chosen by God like you, and from my son Mark,"' (*Ecl. Hist.* 2: 15). In Book Three of his *History* Eusebius refers to Papias again on the subject of the association of Mark with Peter, and quotes Papias as saying that his informant 'the presbyter' used to say: 'Mark, who had been Peter's interpreter, wrote carefully, but not in order, all that he remembered of the Lord's sayings and doings...' (*Ecl. Hist.* 3: 39). There are difficulties about believing that this was really the origin of Mark's gospel, but Papias's words are evidence for people in Asia Minor believing at least as early as A.D. 130 that Peter had been in Rome with Mark. Had this been caused or fostered by the words of 1 Pet. 5: 13? See the commentary on 5: 13 for the possible ways of interpreting 'my son Mark', and on 5: 12 for the possible identity of Silvanus if we reject the idea that he was the Silas of Paul's journey into Europe and part author of the letters to the Thessalonians.

Modern readers are sometimes shocked at the suggestion that a writer would write under the name of a famous man and give no clue to his own identity. This is because they do not understand the custom of the ancient world in this matter. A very large number of books which were written by earnest religious people to warn, encourage and strengthen their readers, especially in the times between the Old and New