



St. Peter's Passion: The Passion Narrative in 1 Peter

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THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

Appropriately, I began this article less than a week after the opening of Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, at theaters across America. The phrase "the passion of the Christ" (or something very close to it) occurs twice in the New Testament, both times in 1 Peter. After telling his readers of a "fiery ordeal breaking out among you to put you to the test" (1 Pet 4:12), the author adds that "to the extent that you share in *the sufferings of the Christ*, be glad, so that when his glory is revealed you may rejoice all the more" (4:13, my italics). Less than a chapter later he continues, "To any elders among you, therefore, I appeal as fellow elder and witness to *the sufferings of the Christ*, and a sharer as well in the glory to be revealed" (1 Pet 5:1; see also 1:11, "*the sufferings intended for Christ* and the glorious events that would follow"; my italics).

The noun "sufferings" (Greek τὰ παθήματα) and the verb "to suffer" (Greek πάσχειν) are Peter's characteristic ways of referring both to Christ's redemptive death on the cross and to the events leading up to it, all that is meant today when we speak of "the passion"¹ (see 2:21, "Christ *suffered* for you"; 2:23, "*suffering*, he

¹F. L. Cross, *First Peter, a Paschal Liturgy* (London: Mowbray, 1954), called attention to the prominence of this vocabulary in 1 Peter, and to the play on words evident in Melito of Sardis and other church fathers between the Greek πάσχειν and the Hebrew פָּסַח, represented in Greek as πάσχα, "passover." His contention that 1 Peter was already making use of this wordplay has not, however, been widely accepted.

First Peter bears witness to the events leading up to Christ's death on the cross, looking at Christ's sufferings first as an example to his followers and then as the price of redemption. Christ's passion is a portent of what is in store for faithful readers.

did not threaten”; 3:18, “Christ once *suffered* for sins”; 4:1, “Christ then having *suffered* in the flesh”).² Peter’s self-characterization as a “witness to the sufferings of the Christ” (5:1) comes into the Latin Vulgate (a translation obviously important to Mel Gibson) as *testis Christi passionum* (literally “witness to the passions of the Christ”).³

The author of 1 Peter speaks here in the first person, for only the second time in the epistle. When he did so before (in 2:11), the focus was not on his own identity, but on his readers’ identity as “aliens and strangers.” Here he calls attention rather to himself, presumably, as “Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1). Yet instead of laboring his claim to apostleship, he defines his apostleship while at the same time building bridges to at least one segment among his readers. To be an apostle, he now claims, is to be their “fellow elder and witness to the sufferings of Christ, and a sharer as well in the glory to be revealed.” It is important to notice that “witness” (Greek μάρτυς) does not mean “eyewitness.”⁴ Peter was in any case *not* an eyewitness to most of the events of the passion, for according to the gospels he deserted Jesus at his arrest and denied him three times. His apostleship is therefore not something that separates him from his readers as a solitary authority figure, as if he has seen the Lord’s passion and they have not. Rather, it unites him to his readers, at least “to any elders among you.” He and they share together both in testifying to “the sufferings of the Christ” and in awaiting “the glory to be revealed.” It is fair to conclude that in speaking this way in 1 Pet 5:1, the author is to some degree characterizing his epistle as a kind of passion document, or perhaps more precisely, a passion-and-vindication document. While not narrative in the strict sense, 1 Peter could be thought of as Peter’s passion narrative in the sense that it purports to give Peter’s testimony to “the sufferings of the Christ,” and this is the case whether or not the apostle Peter is the actual author. The case for Petrine authorship is strong,⁵ and I will continue to refer to the author as “Peter.” Yet even if he is not the author, this epistle bearing his name intends to view “the passion of the Christ” through Peter’s eyes. In doing so, it invites comparison with two other possibly “Petrine” passion narratives, the canonical Gospel of Mark and the non-canonical *Gospel of Peter*.

²Another set of passages in 1 Peter refer to the “suffering” of Christian believers, once using the noun (τὰ παθήματα, 5:9), and seven times using the the verb (πάσχειν, 2:19, 20; 3:14, 17; 4:15, 19; 5:10). In one other instance the reference could be to believers or sufferers in general, but more likely points to Jesus: “for he who suffered in the flesh is through with sin” (4:1b, where πάσχειν seems to mean “suffer death,” just as in all or most of the passages referring to Jesus).

³The sixteenth-century Protestant Latin translation of Theodore Beza, by contrast, had *testis afflictionum Christi* (“witness to the afflictions of the Christ”).

⁴Consequently, when Peter writes, “You have never seen him, but you love him” (1:8), he is not saying, “You have not seen him—but I have.” Rather, he is making a generalization about *all* Christian believers: none of us (Peter included) have “seen” Jesus in the way we will see him one day “at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7).

⁵See J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (Waco: Word, 1988) lv–lxvii.

THE PASSION IN MARK AND THE *GOSPEL OF PETER*

According to Eusebius in the fourth century, citing Papias in the second, citing an anonymous “Elder” even earlier, “Mark became Peter’s interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord’s oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them.”⁶ This tradition, while much debated, is consistent with, possibly even derived from,⁷ a notice at the end of 1 Peter, where Peter sends greetings from an anonymous congregation “in Babylon,” and from “Mark, my son” (1 Pet 5:13). While Papias said nothing of Christ’s passion, but only of “the things said or done by the Lord,” Mark’s Gospel has since been characterized as a “passion narrative with an extended introduction” (famously by Martin Kähler, but again and again, so many times as to enter the public domain).

“Peter is a conspicuous figure in Mark’s Passion Narrative”

Peter is a conspicuous figure in Mark’s Passion Narrative, remembered above all for professing his faithfulness (Mark 14:29, 31) only to fall asleep in Gethsemane (14:37), then fleeing with the other disciples when Jesus was arrested (14:50),⁸ and finally denying Jesus three times (14:68, 70, 71). He is last seen weeping, after the rooster crowed a second time (14:72), in fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy that “on this night before the rooster crows twice you will deny me three times” (14:30). Peter seems to be an outsider during Jesus’ interrogation by the high priest (14:53–65), and by the time Jesus is handed over to Pilate and taken away to be crucified, he has disappeared altogether. If he is Mark’s source for this information, he is merely passing along hearsay. We hear his name only once more, when the young man at the tomb tells the women, “Go, tell his disciples, *and Peter*, that he is leading you into Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (16:7, my italics). The words “just as he told you” point back to Jesus’ prediction on the Mount of Olives that “you will all be scandalized, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered,’ but after I am raised up I will lead you into Galilee” (14:28). This was a scene at which Peter had been present, for he responded, “Even if they all are scandalized, yet not I” (v. 29), inviting Jesus’ prediction of his triple denial. Now Peter is to be reminded of the latter half of Jesus’ prophecy, that “after I

⁶Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15 (Loeb Classical Library 1:297).

⁷According to Eusebius (3.39.16), Papias “used quotations from the first Epistle of John, and likewise also from that of Peter” (LCL 1:299).

⁸Mark (14:47), in contrast to John (18:10–11), does *not* identify Peter as the disciple who cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant.

am raised up I will lead you into Galilee,” and is promised (along with the other disciples) that “there you will see him” (16:7). Mark leaves the circumstances of that reunion to the reader’s imagination, but the placing of the promise so close to the end of his Gospel signals his confidence that it did in fact take place.

The *Gospel of Peter* makes only a halfhearted claim to be Peter’s narrative of the passion. Oddly, it covers precisely that part of the passion story during which Peter, according to Mark’s Gospel, was absent: that is, roughly the events mentioned in Mark 15 and 16. Peter is absent here as well until, abruptly, after Jesus is taken down from the cross and “the Jews and the elders and the priests” begin to say, “Woe unto our sins: the judgement and the end of Jerusalem is drawn nigh” (*Gospel of Peter* 25), the narrator explains, “But I with my fellows was in grief, and we were wounded in our minds and would have hid ourselves; for we were sought after by them as malefactors, and as thinking to set the temple on fire. And beside all these things we were fasting, and we sat mourning and weeping night and day until the sabbath” (26–27; compare Mark 14:72, “and he broke down and began weeping”). Even here, a reader unfamiliar with the title of the work would have no clue that this “I” was Peter. Only at the end of the fragment that we possess does the narrator so identify himself: “But I, Simon Peter, and Andrew my brother, took our nets and went unto the sea” (*Gospel of Peter* 60), introducing perhaps an incident resembling John 21.⁹

THE PASSION IN 1 PETER

The Peter of 1 Peter is much more explicit in claiming to be a “witness” (though by no means an eyewitness) to Christ’s passion (1 Pet 5:1). Where exactly in the epistle does he fulfill that role? Above all in 2:21–25, building on his admonitions to Christian slaves suffering under cruel masters (2:18), or indeed to “anyone suffering unjustly” (v. 19). In such instances, a person must “put up with the afflictions out of a conscious commitment to God.” The key word is “unjustly”; if one’s punishment is deserved there is no merit in patient endurance. Only “when you do good and suffer and patiently endure,” he says, is there “grace before God” (vv. 19–20). At this point, Peter begins to speak of Christ’s passion: “for Christ also suffered for you” (v. 21). Some ancient manuscripts¹⁰ read “died for you,” on the assumption that Peter is speaking of Christ’s redemptive death. But this is not the case. Rather, he is saying that Christ “suffered for you” in the sense that he set an example for all who “suffer unjustly” (vv. 19–20). Peter looks at Christ’s passion first as an example (vv. 21–23), and only after that as a redemptive offering for sin (v. 24). When it is a matter of “following in Christ’s footsteps” (see v. 21), the emphasis is not so much on “suffering death” as simply on “suffering,” that is, on what Christ endured *before* he died. Peter’s main point is not that Christian slaves, or Christian believers generally, can expect to *die* at the hands of their cruel masters

⁹For the translations, see M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924) 92, 94.

¹⁰These include one very early papyrus (P⁸¹), and the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ).

or Roman enemies, but that they can expect ridicule, discrimination, and possible physical harm (for example, being “beaten,” v. 20). Death is of course also a possibility, but a more remote one.

“Peter wants them to return blessing for cursing”

With this in mind, Peter reviews the events of Christ’s passion: “He committed no sin, nor was deceit ever found on his lips. He was insulted, but he would never insult in return; when he suffered, he never threatened, but delivered over to the one who judges justly” (1 Pet 2:22–23). Peter’s immediate source here is not the gospel tradition but Isa 53. The words “He committed no sin, nor was deceit ever found on his lips” (v. 22) come directly from the latter half of Isa 53:9, according to the LXX Greek translation. Yet the direct use of Isaiah stops here (at least until v. 24), and is best described as selective. He could have made much the same point by citing Isa 53:7 LXX, “And he in his affliction would not open his mouth. He was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent he would not open his mouth.” This verse might have come naturally to mind, both because Peter has already compared Jesus to a “faultless and flawless lamb” (1:19) and because the silence of Jesus under interrogation was a firm part of gospel tradition (see, for example, Mark 14:61; 15:5; Luke 23:9; John 19:9; see also the *Gospel of Peter* 11, with its notice that Jesus on the cross “kept silence as one feeling no pain”). But in 1 Peter the accent is *not* on Jesus’ silence, possibly because (except among Christian wives, 3:1) silence is not what he wants to encourage among those who follow Jesus. Rather he wants them to return blessing for cursing (3:9), and to “always be ready to answer anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is yours” (3:15).

This, he implies, is what Jesus did during his passion. He never sinned with his lips by trading insults with his accusers (Peter might have appealed to John 18:23, where Jesus himself implied that he had “spoken well” in the face of hostile interrogation). Nor did Jesus “threaten” anyone. This sounds at first like an unnecessary disclaimer, because we do not normally think of victims “threatening” their tormentors. Such threats, however, were common enough in early Jewish and Christian accounts of torture and martyrdom (for example in early Judaism: 2 Macc 7:36, “but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance”; also 2 Macc 7:17, 19; 4 Macc 9:9, 32; 10:11; and in early Christianity: the second-century *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 11.2, “You threaten with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment”; also the late second-century *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 18.8, “You have condemned us, but God will condemn you”). Peter’s claim is that Jesus in his passion renounced all such verbal threats against his tormentors, but simply “delivered over [παρεδίδου] to the one who judges justly” (2:23).

Delivered whom, or what? Most interpreters have assumed that Jesus delivered, or entrusted, “himself” or “his cause” over to God,¹¹ just as Peter tells believers two chapters later to “entrust their lives to the faithful Creator in the doing of good” (4:19). But the objects of the two preceding negative verbs, “never insulted in return” and “never threatened,” are Jesus’ *enemies*, and it is natural to understand the object of “delivered over” in the same way: Jesus delivered *them* over “to the one who judges justly.” The choice of words is striking, in light of the gospels’ repeated emphasis on Jesus himself being “delivered” over to death, whether by Judas Iscariot or by the Jewish authorities. While Paul Achtemeier finds this interpretation “less likely in a context of nonretaliation,”¹² it is no more inconsistent with nonretaliation than is Paul’s admonition to “leave room for the wrath” in order to “heap coals of fire” on the enemy’s head (Rom 12:19–20). While Jesus renounced threats, the prospect of God’s retributive judgment is no less real than in the Jewish books of the Maccabees or the early Christian accounts of martyrdom. Jesus, according to Peter, simply kept quiet about the judgment to come, but 1 Peter itself feels no such restraint (see, for example, 1:17, “the one who judges impartially”; 4:5, “the one who stands ready to judge the living and the dead”; also 2:8, “In disobeying the word they stumble—and to that they too were appointed,” and 4:17, “what will be the end of those who are disobedient to the gospel of God?”).

“Peter knows that the story ended with Christ’s death and resurrection, but his interest here is in the ‘sufferings’ that preceded the death, because these he believes are portents of what is in store for his readers”

This is Peter’s understanding of “the passion of the Christ,” in the sense of the verbal and physical abuse and torture described, for example, in Mark (15:16–32) and the *Gospel of Peter* (6–19), and at brutal length and in graphic detail in Mel Gibson’s film. Peter knows that the story ended with Christ’s death and resurrection, but his interest here is in the “sufferings” that preceded the death, because these he believes are portents of what is in store for his readers. Conspicuous by its absence is any reflection on Peter’s own part in the story, either his desertion of Jesus or his threefold denial. If Mark is indeed his spiritual “son” (5:13), and the author of the gospel that bears his name, then Peter may have decided that that story had been told sufficiently and that he did not need to dwell on it or labor the point of his own guilt. Or if someone else is the author of 1 Peter, someone who revered the apostle, he may have avoided it as something that could detract from “Peter’s” credibility. Still another possibility is that Peter may have his own sins partly in view as he moves from “Christ as example” (2:21–23) to “Christ as re-

¹¹See for example J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 121.

¹²Paul Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 201.

deemer" (v. 24). "He himself carried up *our* sins," he writes, "in his body to the cross, so that *we*, having parted with those sins, might live for what is right" (my italics). Here again he draws on Isa 53, this time a blend of "He bears our sins" (53:4) and "He carried up the sins of many" (53:12), adding to Isaiah's language a specific reference to "the cross" (literally "the wood") of the passion story. Then he concludes, "By whose wounding you have been healed," echoing Isa 53:5, "By his wounding *we* have been healed" (my italics). Peter's abrupt shift from "we" (v. 24a) to "you" (v. 24b) signals that his interest in 1 Peter is not autobiography but the instruction of his readers. Whatever remote similarity Peter's language may have to Mark's (see Mark 10:45, 14:24) is best explained here by a common dependence on Isaiah. Even the reference to Christ's "wounding," which evokes the scourging scene in Mark (15:15) draws its vocabulary not from Mark but from Isaiah. Mel Gibson's oft-quoted testimony that "Christ's wounds healed my wounds" nowhere finds greater support in Scripture than in these texts from Isaiah and 1 Peter.

At one point only does Peter seem to reflect on the Markan story itself, and even here two biblical texts complicate the picture. He concludes the chapter with a reminder to his (probably Gentile) readers that "you were going astray like sheep, but you have turned now to the shepherd and guardian of your souls" (1 Pet 2:25). The echo of Isaiah is again apparent (see Isa 53:6, "We have all wandered astray like sheep, everyone to his own way"), but Mark's Gospel also plays a role. At the end of Mark, as we have seen, the disciples, and Peter in particular, were to be told that Jesus would fulfill his promise to lead them into Galilee (Mark 14:28), where Peter and his companions "will see him" (Mark 16:7). That promise had been given in a framework of Jesus as "shepherd" to his disciples, on the basis of Zech 13:7, "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered" (Mark 14:27), to which Jesus had added, "but after I am raised up I will lead you into Galilee." To "lead" them, or "go before" them (προάγειν), was a word appropriate to a shepherd leading his sheep to new pastures. In 1 Peter, Jesus as "shepherd" evokes for Peter his resurrection, just as it does for the author of Hebrews (see Heb 13:20). This is perhaps why Peter moves seamlessly from Jesus carrying "our sins in his body to the cross" (2:24), to those gone "astray like sheep" now turning "to the shepherd and guardian of your souls" (2:25). The once stricken shepherd is very much alive, and the scattered sheep are now reunited under his care. This is possible by virtue of the resurrection, but the resurrection itself goes unmentioned, just as in Mark it comes only in a subordinate clause, "after I am raised up." First Peter is quite capable of speaking of the resurrection explicitly (1:3, 21), but here the image of the shepherd and the scattered sheep is sufficient to call it to mind. We meet Jesus as "shepherd" once more, when Peter urges his "fellow elders" to "be examples to the flock," reminding them that "when the chief shepherd appears you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (5:4). Christ's role as shepherd in 1 Peter belongs less to "the sufferings of the Christ" than to "the glory to be revealed," whether in his resurrection (see 1:21, "gave him glory") or at his final appearing.

CHRIST'S PASSION AND OURS

What all this demonstrates is that “St. Peter’s Passion” consistently strikes a balance between “the sufferings intended for Christ” and “the glorious events to follow” (1:11; see also 4:13 and 5:1). Peter does so in order to assure his readers that their sufferings too, whatever they may be, will also give way to “glory” and vindication. “For Christ too once suffered for sins,” he reminds them yet again, “a just man on behalf of the unjust, that he might bring you to God” (3:18). He seems at first to echo 2:21–25, but instead of dwelling on Christ’s passion he moves quickly to vindication: “He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit” (v. 18), and has now “gone to heaven, with angels and authorities and powers in submission to him” (3:22).¹³ First Peter stands as a reminder to the church today that in reflecting on “the passion of the Christ,” whether on film or simply as part of the liturgical year, Christian believers should not lose sight of how the story ended—and will end. ⊕

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¹³The matched pair, “suffering” (or “passion”) and “glory” here becomes a rhyming triad: “put to death” (θανάτωθεις), “made alive” (ζωοποιηθεις), “gone to heaven” (πορευθεις εις ουρανόν). That basic point should not be lost sight of in the centuries-long debate over the purpose and nature of that “journey to heaven” to subdue “disobedient spirits” (see vv. 19–21, and W. J. Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18–4:6* [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989] 143–218).