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## “A Few Bones to Pick: Peter and His Significance”—A Fifth Review of CNN’s “Finding Jesus 2” Series



St Peter, Vatican City (Oct. 2013)

PAUL N. ANDERSON

The fifth episode of CNN's "Finding Jesus" series explores the character and place of the historical Peter. Portrayed as a fisherman—a leading disciple of Jesus in the Gospels—Simon Peter is presented as both robust and impetuous. As chief among the twelve, he promises to stand with Jesus until the end, and yet, he also denies Jesus three times, as he also fears for his life following the arrest of Jesus. As Michael Peppard correctly puts it, the practice of the Romans at the time was to arrest not only insurrectionist leaders, but also to deal swiftly with their followers. Thus, while the betraying of Jesus by Judas may be hard to understand, the threefold denial of Jesus by Peter is not. The lives of all of Jesus's followers were in danger, and this is shown by Peter's failure in his test of courage. Then again, Peter becomes one of the key leaders of the early church, but what was his significance in particular?

In keeping with the character of the other episodes in the series, the scholars interviewed follow the basic presentation of their subject as presented in the canonical Gospels, dealing with evidence—either supportive or lacking—along the way. In this sense, to use the language of Jack Miles in his book, *God: A Biography* (Vintage, 1996), they serve as scholars rather than critics. While there is no early tradition connecting Peter's travels with the city of Rome (Mark Goodacre), there are early traditions dating back to the Byzantine era (4th century AD and following) remembering Peter's presence in Rome (Nicola Denzey Lewis), and bones were discovered in the 1940s that could be traced back to the final resting place of Peter himself.

It is on this particular note that the episode opens. In November of 2013, Pope Francis presented to the public ancient bones purported belonging to Saint Peter. The previous month, I had actually seen these bones, barely visible under the chapel in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, having presented a paper at the Vatican's Ratzinger Symposium on *The Gospels: History and Christology*. Several types of evidence support the likelihood that these might indeed be the bones of Peter: first, the site is in an ancient burial complex going back to the first century and earlier; second, an ancient engraving can be read to say "Peter is here" (though not conclusively); third, carbon 14 dating of these bones show them to be those of a robust male 60-70 years of

age, dating from the appropriate time period. A fourth element of evidence not mentioned by the CNN episode is that an ancient worship shrine predating the building of a church is found on that spot, going back to the pre-Constantinian era, so the traditional connections with Peter are strong.

While these features support the memory of Peter's death in Rome, including the early 3rd century tradition of Tertullian that he was crucified there, however, the evidence is not conclusive. An ancillary element of potential evidence was tested by Oxford scientists Tom Higham and George Cezan (a tooth claimed to be that of Saint Peter), but the results came back as dating from the 3rd or 4th century AD and are thus negative. Perhaps it was a different Peter? Most important, however, is not whether Peter's bones were laid to rest in Rome, but what Peter's role as a disciple conveys to later followers of Jesus. In that sense, Peter's boldness, his failures, and yet his restoration by Jesus around a charcoal fire (in John 18:18 and 21:9 Peter denies *and* affirms Jesus—around a charcoal fire) are the most significant in remembering his legacy. As Mark Goodacre puts it, Peter is “the most three-dimensional” among the disciples. Peter thus continues to be a bridge between Jewish and Gentile cultures and also between the first followers of Jesus and later generations of believers.

On this point, however, the presentation could have been more analytical, as it is really anachronistic to refer to Peter as “the first pope” (Mark Goodacre). The earliest head of the Christian movement was James the brother of Jesus, but with his passing, a dynastic form of governance was replaced by an institutional one, in the memory of Peter and the apostles. Paul, however, advocated the appointing of presbyters (elders) among the churches, and John emphasized the availability of the Holy Spirit to all believers, so the New Testament reflects multiple models of governance—each with their strengths and weaknesses—as Raymond Brown sketched so helpfully in *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (Paulist, 1984). Further, Rome was not immediately the center of the Christian movement. Antioch served as a key orthodox Jewish-Christian center for some time, and other centers of the movement would have included Ephesus and other cities in the Greco-Roman world in addition to Rome.

It was not really until the controversy of Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 250 AD) that the authority of Rome's bishop was elevated over leaders of other centers within the developing Christian movement, as the issue to be determined revolved around which bishop's ministry was appropriately authorized, given that Cyprian had gone into hiding during a time of persecution. On that score, Matthew 16:17-19 was cited as seeing Jesus to have established his church upon Peter—the rock (*Petros* in Greek means “rock;” likewise, the nickname given Simon by Jesus in John 1:42 is *Kēphas*—Aramaic for “rock”), leading to the ascendancy of the bishop of Rome over other Christian leaders. Of course, not all Christian communities agreed, and the fourteen Eastern Orthodox communions would still debate that interpretation of Matthew's text.

And, to this day, debates over the best interpretations of Matthew 16:17-19 continue. Five hundred years ago, leading interpreters within the Reformation understood that “rock” to be Peter's confession, rather than his physical location—hence the value of getting one's theology straight. Others might even see the “foundational rock” of the church as being the Father's revelatory work, as ascertaining the truth of Jesus as the Christ is not mediated by “flesh and blood” but is discerned spiritually and inwardly (Matt 16:17)—hence, the work of the Holy Spirit being the prime feature of apostolic succession. Therefore, the significance of Peter and the priestly work of Christ continue to be timely issues of debate. Martin Luther cited John 20:21-23, for instance, as advocating the priesthood of every believer, not just institutional descendants of Peter.

Given the fact that Jesus's response to Peter after his confession is not found in Mark or any of the other Gospels, but only in Matthew, the scholars interviewed or their editors should have noted the fact that most scholars see the “keys to the kingdom” passage as rooting in later Matthean tradition rather than going back to Jesus himself. On this point, the episode should have been more analytical. Matthew 16:17-19 still provides a link to the ministries of the apostles for later generations of believers after the deaths of Peter and other apostles. So, it nonetheless functions to set up an institutional model of church governance in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch (ministering several decades before his martyrdom in Rome ca. 110 AD), whether or not it represents the original intentionality of Jesus for the movement founded in his

name. The point, though, is that this is not the only apostolic memory of Peter's role in its relation to how Christ leads the church, nor is a Petrine structure of governance the only New Testament model of church leadership.

On this score, the CNN episode could have benefitted from a closer look Peter's presentation in the Fourth Gospel. While the Gospel of John still presents Peter as chief among the apostles, it is the Beloved Disciple who leans against the breast of Jesus at the last supper, whom Peter asks if Jesus was referring to him as the predicted traitor. While Peter and the other disciples are absent from the crucifixion (Candida Moss), the Beloved Disciple braves the danger and is present, along with the women. Not all of the disciples covered in that final hour. At the empty tomb, the Beloved Disciple arrives first, but he then allows Peter to enter before him. And, in the lakeside appearance of Jesus, it is the Beloved Disciple who points out the risen Lord to Peter in the boat, thus once more becoming a connective link (a priest?) between Peter and the Lord. Further, Peter's confession in the Fourth Gospel is not followed by his (or his followers) being imbued with institutional authority by Jesus; rather, Peter is presented in John 6:68-69 as affirming the sole authority of Jesus: "*You have the words of eternal life!*" Is Peter here presented as *returning* the keys back to Jesus? And, rather than entrusting a disciple with instrumental keys as an image of church leadership, in his dying words on the cross, the Johannine Jesus entrusts the Beloved Disciple with *his mother*—a relational and familial image of church authority, perhaps intended as a corrective to rising institutionalism in the late first-century Christian situation.

In these and other ways, the place of Peter is indeed significant in the early Christian movement, although it is really the Apostle Paul, who shapes the character of the Gentile mission and its developments. And, as important as Peter's history in Rome might have been, seeing the Jesus of history as challenging Jewish centers of worship only to erect a Christian center based upon the ministry of one of his followers betrays a questionable interpretation not only of Matthew's text but of the entirety of Jesus's mission as represented in the New Testament. It also fails to note John's presentation of Peter as affirming the sole authority of Jesus, who according to John 14-16 is able to guide all believers into truth through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit—

equally accessible to all, not simply a hierarchy. That being the case, the Johannine juxtaposition of Peter and the Beloved Disciple could have been engaged at least a bit within this episode if a representative canonical understanding of Peter is to be considered.

While the itinerary of Peter is noted as central to the Catholic view of papal authority, the fifth CNN episode of “Finding Jesus” is correct in saying that this might not be the most significant feature of Peter’s memory. Given his denial of Jesus on the night of his arrest, Peter’s later willingness to stand with his Lord even unto death (also predicted by Jesus in John 21:18-19) poses a prime example for later believers to follow. Rather than seeing Peter’s significance as a narrowing of apostolic leadership within the Jesus movement, though, we are reminded in 1 Peter 2:9 that all followers of Jesus are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” In that sense, perhaps even more important than the final resting place of the chief of the apostles is the ongoing significance of his teaching and example.

While some might have a bone to pick on the final resting place of Peter, his ongoing contribution stands on its own. If the place of Peter is taken seriously, here we see that grace is real, and in the calling to follow Jesus there’s always a second chance. After all, if the chief among early Christian leaders can affirm the priesthood and royalty of other believers, emphasizing the life-giving words of the Lord, perhaps that points the way forward for the rest of us, as well.