

The Gospel of Peter

Translated by Raymond Brown

The **Gospel of Peter** (Greek: κατά Πέτρον ευαγγέλιον), or **Gospel according to Peter**, is one of the non-Canonical gospels which were rejected by the Church Fathers and the Catholic Church's synods of Carthage and Rome, which established the New Testament canon, as apocryphal. It was the first of the non-canonical gospels to be rediscovered, preserved in the dry sands of Egypt. A major focus of the surviving fragment of the Gospel of Peter is the passion narrative, which is notable for ascribing responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus to Herod Antipas rather than to Pontius Pilate.

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[1] But of the Jews none washed his hands, neither Herod nor one of his judges. And since they did not desire to wash, Pilate stood up.

[2] And then Herod the king orders the Lord to be taken away, having said to them, 'What I ordered you to do, do.'

[3] But Joseph, the friend of Pilate and of the Lord, had been standing there; and knowing they were about to crucify him, he came before Pilate and requested the body of the Lord for burial.

[4] And Pilate, having sent to Herod, requested his body.

[5] And Herod said: 'Brother Pilate, even if no one had requested him, we would have buried him, since indeed Sabbath is dawning. For in the Law it has been written: The sun is not to set on one put to death.' And he gave him over to the people before the first day of their feast of the Unleavened Bread.

[6] But having taken the Lord, running, they were pushing him and saying, 'Let us drag along the Son of God now that we have power over him.'

[7] And they clothed him with purple and sat him on a chair of judgment, saying: 'Judge justly, King of Israel.'

[8] And a certain one of them, having brought a thorny crown, put it on the head of the Lord.

[9] And others who were standing there were spitting in his face, and others slapped his cheeks. Others were jabbing him with a reed; and some scourged him, saying, 'With such honor let us honor the Son of God.'

[10] And they brought two wrongdoers and crucified the Lord in the middle of them. But he was silent as having no pain.

[11] And when they had set the cross upright, they inscribed that THIS IS THE KING OF ISRAEL.

[12] And having put his garments before him, they divided them up and threw as a gamble for them.

[13] But a certain one of those wrongdoers reviled them, saying: 'We have been made suffer thus because of the wrong that we have done; but this one, having become Savior of men, what injustice had he done to you?'

[14] And having become irritated at him, they ordered that there be no leg-breaking, so that he might die tormented.

[15] But it was midday, and darkness held fast all Judea; and they were distressed and anxious lest the sun had set, since he was still living.

[For] it is written for them: Let not the sun set on one put to death.

[16] And someone of them said: 'Give him to drink gall with vinegary wine.' And having made a mixture, they gave to drink.

[17] And they fulfilled all things and completed the sins on their own head.

[18] But many went around with lamps, thinking that it was night, and they fell.
[19] And the Lord screamed out, saying: 'My power, O power, you have forsaken me.'
And having said this, he was taken up.
[20] And at the same hour the veil of the Jerusalem sanctuary was torn into two.
[21] And they drew out the nails from the hands of the Lord and placed him on the earth;
and all the earth was shaken, and a great fear came about.
[22] Then the sun shone, and it was found to be the ninth hour.
[23] And the Jews rejoiced and gave his body to Joseph that he might bury it, since he
was one who had seen the many good things he did.
[24] And having taken the Lord, he washed and tied him with a linen cloth and brought
him into his own sepulcher, called the Garden of Joseph.
[25] Then the Jews and the elders and the priests, having come to know how much
wrong they had done themselves, began to beat themselves and say: 'Woe to our sins.
The judgment has approached and the end of Jerusalem.'
[26] But I with the companions was sorrowful; and having been wounded in spirit, we
were in hiding, for we were sought after by them as wrongdoers and as wishing to set
fire to the sanctuary.
[27] In addition to all these things we were fasting; and we were sitting mourning and
weeping night and day until the Sabbath.
[28] But the scribes and Pharisees and elders, having gathered together with one
another, having heard that all the people were murmuring and beating their breasts,
saying that 'If at his death these very great signs happened, behold how just he was,'
[29] feared (especially the elders) and came before Pilate, begging him and saying, [30]
'Give over soldiers to us in order that we may safeguard his burial place for three days,
lest, having come, his disciples steal him, and the people accept that he is risen from
the death, and they do us wrong.'
[31] But Pilate gave over to them Petronius the centurion with soldiers to safeguard the
sepulcher. And with these the elders and scribes came to the burial place.
[32] And having rolled a large stone, all who were there, together with the centurion and
the soldiers, placed it against the door of the burial place.
[33] And they marked it with seven wax seals; and having pitched a tent there, they
safeguarded it.
[34] But early when the Sabbath was dawning, a crowd came from Jerusalem and the
surrounding area in order that they might see the sealed tomb.
[35] But in the night in which the Lord's day dawned, when the soldiers were
safeguarding it two by two in every watch, there was a loud voice in heaven;
[36] and they saw that the heavens were opened and that two males who had much
radiance had come down from there and come near the sepulcher.
[37] But that stone which had been thrust against the door, having rolled by itself, went
a distance off the side; and the sepulcher opened, and both the young men entered.
[38] And so those soldiers, having seen, awakened the centurion and the elders (for
they too were present, safeguarding).
[39] And while they were relating what they had seen, again they see three males who
have come out from the sepulcher, with the two supporting the other one, and a cross
following them,
[40] and the head of the two reaching unto heaven, but that of the one being led out by
a hand by them going beyond the heavens.
[41] And they were hearing a voice from the heavens saying, 'Have you made

proclamation to the fallen-asleep?'

[42] And an obeisance was heard from the cross, 'Yes.'

[43] And so those people were seeking a common perspective to go off and make these things clear to Pilate;

[44] and while they were still considering it through, there appear again the opened heavens and a certain man having come down and entered into the burial place.

[45] Having seen these things, those around the centurion hastened at night before Pilate (having left the sepulcher which they were safeguarding) and described all the things that they indeed had seen, agonizing greatly and saying: 'Truly he was God's Son.'

[46] In answer Pilate said: 'I am clean of the blood of the Son of God, but it was to you that this seemed [the thing to do].'

[47] Then all, having come forward, were begging and exhorting him to command the centurion and the soldiers to say to no one what they had seen.

[48] 'For,' they said, 'it is better for us to owe the debt of the greatest sin in the sight of God than to fall into the hands of the Jewish people and be stoned.'

[49] And so Pilate ordered the centurion and the soldiers to say nothing.

[50] Now at the dawn of the Lord's Day Mary Magdalene, a female disciple of the Lord (who, afraid because of the Jews since they were inflamed with anger, had not done at the tomb of the Lord what women were accustomed to do for the dead beloved by them),

[51] having taken with her women friends, came to the tomb where he had been placed.

[52] And they were afraid lest the Jews should see them and were saying, 'If indeed on that day on which he was crucified we could not weep and beat ourselves, yet now at his tomb we may do these things.

[53] But who will roll away for us even the stone placed against the door of the tomb in order that, having entered, we may sit beside him and do the expected things?

[54] For the stone was large, and we were afraid lest anyone see us. And if we are unable, let us throw against the door what we bring in memory of him; let us weep and beat ourselves until we come to our homes.'

[55] And having gone off, they found the sepulcher opened. And having come forward, they bent down there and saw there a certain young man seated in the middle of the sepulcher, comely and clothed with a splendid robe, who said to them:

[56] 'Why have you come? Whom do you seek? Not that one who was crucified? He is risen and gone away. But if you do not believe, bend down and see the place where he lay, because he is not here. For he is risen and gone away to there whence he was sent.'

[57] Then the women fled frightened.

[58] Now it was the final day of the Unleavened Bread; and many went out returning to their home since the feast was over.

[59] But we twelve disciples of the Lord were weeping and sorrowful; and each one, sorrowful because of what had come to pass, departed to his home.

[60] But I, Simon Peter, and my brother Andrew, having taken our nets, went off to the sea. And there was with us Levi of Alphaeus whom the Lord ...

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The Gospel of Peter (150-200AD)

The Gospel of Peter was first discovered by the French archaeologist, Urbain Bouriant in 1886. He recovered the 8-9th century manuscript from a monk's grave in Akhmim Egypt, approximately six miles from the Gnostic Nag Hammadi Library discovery. The text available to us is only a fragment and it represents a narrative description of the Passion of Jesus (his crucifixion and resurrection). It is unknown if the original Gospel of Peter was a complete narrative about the life of Jesus or if the text was always limited to the Passion. The Gospel of Peter may have been very popular among early Christians and was certainly known to the early Church Fathers.

Why Isn't It Considered Reliable?

Eusebius mentions the Gospel of Peter and cites a letter written by Serapion, the Bishop of Antioch between 190 and 203AD. Serapion describes the Gospel of Peter as mostly trustworthy, declaring that "most of it belonged to the right teaching of the Saviour". But Serapion also condemned the text and warned that some parts incorrectly described Jesus in a Gnostic or "Docetic" manner, as a spirit whose body was only an illusion. Much later in history, Church leaders continued to condemn the work as heretical; both Jerome and Pope Gelasius I classified the text in this manner. In any case, scholars date the Gospel of Peter as being authored in the late 2nd century and consider any internal claims to having been authored by the Apostle Peter to be inauthentic. The Gospel of Peter appears in history far too late to have been written by Peter.

How Does It Corroborate the Life of Jesus?

Interestingly, the Gospel of Peter confirms and acknowledges much of the Passion narrative without actually utilizing material from Luke or Matthew. This has caused many scholars to wonder if the Gospel represents yet another independent eyewitness account or is referencing source material that was also referenced by the other Gospel writers (the latter opinion being that of more 'liberal' theologians and literary critics). The Gospel of Peter agrees remarkably with much of the Passion narrative, identifying Pilate and Herod by name, and identifying Joseph (presumably of Arimathea) as the "friend of Pilate" who asked for Jesus' body. The details of the Passion are then described in a manner similar to the canonical Gospels. Jesus is taunted and subjected to the crown of thorns and the purple robe. His opponents beat Him and slapped Him and ultimately crucified him between two thieves, placing a sign on His cross that read, "THIS IS THE KING OF ISRAEL". His garments were divided and the executioners gambled for them. They did not break Jesus' legs as He hung on the cross, but instead gave Him gall and vinegar to drink. At the death of Jesus, the veil of the Temple was torn in two, and the sky became dark. Jesus was later removed from the cross and taken to Joseph's tomb. Pilate assigned guards to Jesus' tomb (the lead guard was named "Petronius") but on the night before Resurrection Sunday, the tomb was visited by angels and Jesus was resurrected from the grave. The guards saw the stone being rolled from the grave, but the silence of the guards was purchased and, like the canonical Gospels, Mary and her "women friends" are the first to visit the tomb and speak to the angel. Three disciples of Jesus are mentioned specifically (Peter, Andrew and Matthew).

Where (and Why) Does It Differ from the Reliable Accounts?

Serapion's concerns related to the Gospel of Peter seem to be well deserved. The Gospel demonstrates a Docetic view of Jesus that is consistent with the Gnostic view of matter shared in the community located just six miles from the monk's grave where the Gospel was first discovered. The text encourages an immaterial view of Jesus. For example, when Jesus died on the cross, the Gospel of Peter claims that He "remained silent, as though he felt no pain," and at the point of Jesus' death, He is described as ascending immediately to heaven ("...he was taken up.") The narrative does, however, claim that the "body" of Jesus is ultimately placed in the tomb. The surviving Gospel fragment is missing its closing chapter(s), but it does not seem to contain any accounts of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel of Peter seems to describe Jesus as resurrecting and ascending on the very same day (although it is unknown if the missing chapters would include the reappearance of Jesus among the disciples). A Docetic view of Jesus would naturally exclude such accounts of a resurrected Jesus with a material body. Some scholars have also observed what appears to be an anti-Jewish inclination within the Gospel of Peter as well. The Gospel omits all references to fulfilled prophecy from the Old Testament and exonerates Pilate from any responsibility in crucifying Jesus (laying the blame on Herod and the Jews who, unlike Pilate, fail to "wash their hands").

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