

Simon Peter in the Gospel of Mark: An Exemplary Failure?

The way Peter is portrayed in the New Testament, in Mark's gospel in particular, and the way he was remembered by the Christian community in the first centuries of the church.

As is often the case in Oxford, as I began to explore the field I found that possibly *the* world authority on Peter and his place in the communal memory of the early church is Markus Bockmuehl, Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture here. (When he attended a recent conference on Peter, 'he quickly emerged as the undisputed guest of honour' (B&H xvi)). His books, *The Remembered Peter* and *Simon Peter in Scripture and Memory* have been immensely helpful.

My own interest in Peter concerns the traditional identification of his role as that of a leader – the leader of the Twelve and, later, of the nascent Christian communities in Jerusalem and then Rome.

I hope to consider Simon Peter through the lens of leadership and the importance of exemplars in the formation of leaders. The paper has three parts. First, I will look at the way Peter is presented in the text of Mark's gospel, noting both his undoubted priority and leadership but, also, the striking degree of attention paid to his failures; I will finish this section with a short reflection on the ways contemporary scholars have understood the formative and exemplary characteristics of this narrative. Second, I will turn to the evidence we have for the way Peter was remembered in the early church, particularly by the Christian community in Rome. Necessarily, in a short paper by a non-expert, I will focus on one particular expression of that memory. And, to maintain

focus, I will be particularly concerned to consider how the early Christian community reconciled the apparent tension between ‘Peter as exemplary leader’ and ‘Peter as a failure’. Finally, I will offer some thoughts on how what we have seen in the portrayal and the memory might impact our understanding of leadership and exemplarity in both specifically Christian and generically plural contexts.

Part 1: Simon Peter in Mark's Gospel

Simon Peter emerges as the foremost disciple from chapter 1 of the gospel. The call is remarkable primarily for its simplicity and for the alacrity with which he and his brother Andrew respond: 'Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him' (1:16-18 NRSVA). Note that here and throughout the gospel, Peter is named first in any listing of any grouping of the disciples. Later in the chapter, it is Simon Peter's house that Jesus visits after preaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. And it is Simon Peter's mother-in-law that he heals (1:29-31). By the end of the chapter, Mark considers it appropriate to refer simply to 'Simon and his companions' in reference to those following, and in this case, searching for Jesus (1:36).

This priority is formalised in chapter 3 when Jesus calls a select group of disciples to himself, beginning: 'So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder)' and so on (3:16-19). As in the other Gospels, there is a privileged subset within this group – Peter, James and John (and, on occasion, Andrew). Only they are invited into the inner chamber to see the raising of the synagogue leader's daughter (5:35-43), to receive teaching on the signs of the end times (13:3-8) and, most significantly, they are chosen to witness the transfiguration (9:5-13). Here, it is Peter who overcomes his fear to speak on their behalf: 'Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah' (9:5-6). Most importantly, in chapter 8,

it is Peter who correctly answers Jesus' question about his true identity: 'He asked [his disciples], "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."' (8:27b-30).

Unsurprisingly, this epoch-making moment of revelation marks a point of inflection in the Gospel. Surprisingly, with respect to Peter, the shift is towards increasing attention to his failings. Immediately after his confession of the Messiah, Peter finds himself sternly, even harshly, reprimanded by Jesus: 'he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things' (8:31-3). While Peter's interjection here, along with his clumsy intervention on the Mount of Transfiguration, may be put down to an excess of concern for Jesus, or simply to impetuosity, Mark pays most attention to a more serious and less excusable failure.

When, in chapter 14, Jesus first warns his disciples that they will desert him in his time of greatest need, Peter is indignant: "'Even though all become deserters, I will not'" (29). This declaration elicits Jesus' fateful prediction: "'Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times'" (30). Unabashed, Peter responds yet more 'vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you"' (31).

Ironically, it is here and only here that Peter takes centre stage in Mark's narrative. Bockmuehl in his book *Scripture and Memory* (140) observes: 'On any reckoning, it remains strikingly indicative of Peter's importance for Mark that the denial represents the only episode in the entire Gospel in which the main protagonist is a disciple'. After failing to offer spiritual and moral support at Gethsemane, where they fall asleep in spite of Jesus' 'distress', 'agitation', and

‘grief’ (resulting in one very uncharacteristic instance of speechlessness on Peter’s part: ‘and they did not know what to say to him’ (40)), Jesus is betrayed and arrested and Peter alone follows ‘at a distance’ and enters ‘right into the courtyard of the high priest’ (54).

But it is here, ‘sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire’ that Peter fails most grievously, denying his Lord not once, not twice, but three times (14:66-70). Eventually, ‘[Peter] began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.” At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, ‘Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ And he broke down and wept’ (14:71-2). Unlike other of the canonical gospels, Mark’s narrative offers Peter no opportunity for repentance and restoration.

Before we turn to the way Peter was remembered in the early church, it is worth taking a few moments to consider the two main reasons given by modern scholars for the apparently harsh portrayal of Peter in Mark’s gospel – the first historical and political, the second, of greater interest as we consider Christian leadership, literary and pedagogical.

The first position, considers the politics of the early Christian communities, especially the tensions between them. On this historical reading, Mark is assumed to be of a faction that had something to gain by questioning the character of Peter and, thereby, downplaying his importance in the development and leadership of early Christianity. Scholars ‘argued that the Twelve (and Peter in particular) had been deliberately cast in a negative way

because they represented a Palestinian Christology to which the evangelist was opposed, creating a divide between Mark's Hellenistic Christianity on the one hand and the Palestinian Christianity of Peter, James, and the Jerusalem church on the other' (B&H 57).

Today, literary studies are more common and they identify a pedagogical intent: 'Rather than regarding Peter and the disciples as ciphers for a heretical faction, most literary critics suggest that readers are to identify with them; they embody the situation of most readers, struggling to follow Jesus to the best of their ability. Thus, although Peter can exhibit both positive and negative qualities, the reader remains sympathetic towards him' (B&H, 57).

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, in her book *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel*, says: 'the disciples of the Markan Jesus are portrayed with both strong points and weak points in order to serve as realistic and encouraging models for hearers/readers who experience both strength and weakness in their Christian discipleship ... [along with the crowd, the disciples] serve to open the story of Jesus and the narrative of Mark out to a larger group – whoever hears or reads the Gospel of Mark' (p. xii).

For Malbon, the key question dividing scholars concerns whether Peter and the disciples were, overall, "fallible followers" or "final failures" (pp. 11-12)? As an example of a scholar arguing for 'failure', Malbon quotes Best: "'If a writer wishes to talk about discipleship using men as examples ... there are two obvious approaches ... He may either set forward a series of examples of good discipleship with the implication that these examples should be followed ... or

he may instruct through the failures of his examples ... Mark chose the latter course''' (41).

Malbon leans towards the more complex and variegated category of 'fallible followers' (42). 'Mark seems to continue this convention by presenting contrasting groups – exemplars to emulate and enemies to eschew. But perhaps Mark challenges this convention as well by presenting fallible followers with whom to identify' (12). She quotes Tannehill in order to tease out the way in which the portrayal of 'fallible followers' might act upon the readers: 'tension between identification and repulsion can lead the sensitive reader beyond a naively positive view of himself to self-criticism and repentance. The composition of Mark strongly suggests that the author, by the way in which he tells the disciples' story, intended to awaken his readers to their failures as disciples and call them to repentance.'" [Tannehill, 392-3] In conclusion there is, for Malbon and others, clear pedagogical and formational intent:

The Markan portrait of fallible followers is a composite one ... Only by such a composite and complex image of followers is the author of the Markan Gospel able to communicate clearly and powerfully to the reader the twofold message: anyone can be a follower, no one finds it easy (67).

Overall, this seems to me to seem to offer a credible account of the exemplary formational potential of the gospel read in this way. It raises relevant questions for us in thinking about the question: What is the exemplary role of Christian leaders today? And what kind of relationship between leaders and followers is most appropriate and conducive to the right kind of example?

Part 2: Peter Received and Remembered in the Early Church

As stated in the Introduction, I am particularly concerned to consider how the early Christian community reconciled the apparent tension between Peter as a leader and Peter as a failure, between Peter's great importance and his unflattering portrayal in Mark's gospel. In an albeit superficial manner, I am here following the method utilised by Bockmuehl who argues that attention to early Christian reception: 'enhances our understanding of the "historic" Peter, the narrated and remembered and emulated apostle whose complex life stands at the fountainhead of richly variegated rivulets and streams of Petrine tradition. The text's "living footprint" may grant insights that remain inaccessible to the grammarian and archaeologist.' [Remembered Peter, 188] Bockmuehl argues passionately for the importance of Peter in the early church. For example:

Peter's unexpectedly high profile associates him consistently, authoritatively, and in some sense uniquely, with the Jesus tradition ... Peter ... is consistently represented in the early church as a guarantor of the Jesus tradition that *gave rise* to the gospels. (6)

After Jesus, he is the most frequently mentioned individual not only in the gospels, but in the NT as a whole. The canonical record makes Peter the first of the Twelve to be called and the first in every list of the disciples; the first to identify Jesus as Messiah and the first of the Twelve to witness his resurrection; the first to preach publicly the Christian message *about* Jesus; and the first to take it to Gentiles ... no other individual approaches Simon Peter's personal or constitutional stature in relation to Jesus or to the church as a whole. Despite undeniable tensions and differences, the cumulative effect of these sources is to render him a – quite possible *the* – key apostolic leader.' (6-7)

It is salutary to remember that in this period, precisely when Peter's standing was so high, Mark's gospel, arguably so negative and critical, was closely associated with Peter. The earliest example of the tradition of Peter's influence in the writing of Mark goes back to Papias, a Bishop in the Roman Province of Asia around the beginning of the second century, a member of just the third Christian generation who, likely, had been in touch with the first, apostles, generation, notably John the Elder [Bauckham, 12-13]. And the tradition continues through the philosopher Justin Martyr (c. 100-65) in his Dialogue of the mid-second century, and on to Irenaeus of Lyons (AD130-200) in the later second century [Scripture and Memory, 13-16]. Bockmuehl notes that while such a connection 'is often scornfully dismissed' it is 'a case ripe for re-examination' (86). Recent treatments arguing for the validity of the link, include: Helen K. Bond, 'Was Peter behind Mark's Gospel?' (46-61, B&H) Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, and Bockmuehl's own work in *The Remembered Peter*.

For the purposes of this paper, we can remain agnostic as to whether Peter contributed to Mark's gospel. What matters is that the association existed in these early Christian communities. And given the association, to modern eyes there would seem to be a tension between Peter's status as an important leader of the early church, and this portrayal of grievous failure in the gospel most closely associated with him.

We're going to look at one particular test case. The memory and reception of Peter in Rome, especially as understood via the archaeological

evidence. Here, I am particularly grateful for Peter Lampe's essay, 'Traces of Peter Veneration in Roman Archaeology' (B&H, 273-317). Lampe addresses what is, for us, the key questions: 'What was the Roman Christians' Peter story as reflected in archaeological and iconographic documents? Which aspects were important for them ...? (273)

Roman veneration of Peter can be traced all the way back from the overwhelming majesty of the current St Peter's Basilica whose construction in the early sixteenth century was on the site of the original Basilica constructed in the fourth century by Constantine. Lampe (274-80) notes that huge efforts were made to incorporate a small, existing memorial (or edicula), assumed to be at Peter's grave site, into this first Basilica: 'They prepared to make the effort of building extensive earthworks and erecting large substructures because, given the location of the edicula, the basilica had to be built on an unfavourable incline ... Their cost benefit calculation presupposes a significant veneration for the apostle Peter at that time' (274). The memorial itself can be traced back to 160-180 CE (280).

With respect to the nature of the veneration, perhaps the most interesting evidence comes from the catacomb and sarcophagi images uncovered by archaeologists. According to Lampe (table p. 315) more than 10% of all representations of Peter in the catacombs incorporate imagery that connects with his 'denial', his greatest failure. This is in comparison with only 6% relating to the narrative of his revelation that Jesus was the Messiah, and the tradition of his having been given the 'keys' to the Kingdom. In spite of the fact that this scenario and this image is so central to his leadership and authority and linked

to the precedence of the Bishop of Rome. Even more strikingly, on sarcophagi up to 63 instances of the denial motif have been found, in comparison with just 6 referencing the 'keys' tradition (table 316-7).

Generally, the denial motif is shown by the presence of a cockerel or rooster. Lampe explains this unusual choice of iconography:

What moved families to chose this motif? Had the deceased at one time in life, possibly during the Diocletian persecution, denied Christ and hoped to be mercifully accepted by Christ as Peter had been, despite his failures? The Peter figure in catacomb frescoes was a subject of identification not only as someone who had to face the cruelty of death but also as someone who after repeated failures had received undeserved grace and forgiveness (291).

In other words, far from detracting from his veneration or invalidating Peter as an exemplar, his fallibility, including the terrible moral and relational failure of the denial, was intimately connected with the way in which the Roman Christians related to him. Concluding as we began, with a summary statement from Bockmuehl:

the remembered Peter of the Gospels and the Epistles is not portrayed as exceptional in his role as fellow-shepherd and fellow-servant of the servants of Christ (1 Pet. 5:1-4); the apostle's very fallibility and fragility places him on the same road of discipleship as all other believers. Simon Peter is first and foremost neither an authority nor an institution, neither powerful nor infallible, but a flawed disciple and shepherd of Christ's flock' (Scripture and Memory, 182).

Might this study of Peter in Mark and in memory help us to understand the relation between leaders and followers in ways that avoid some of the catastrophic failures of leadership, and resulting hurt, we all too frequently experience?