Gospel of Peter 1-9; 35-46

Exoneration of Pilate

Date: 130 CE to 190 CE
Place: Syria
Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Apocrypha

Title of work: Gospel of Peter
Reference: 1-9; 35-46

Commentary:

For many centuries, the Gospel of Peter was only known from the Patristic authors. The earliest reference is from Serapion of Antioch, who wrote a short tractate (now itself lost, but partially preserved in Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History 6.12.1-6) about a certain “Gospel According to Peter.” In 1886-87, a manuscript (now known as the Akhmîm Codex) was discovered in Cairo containing what would later be identified as a fragment of this Gospel of Peter. Not all scholars are convinced that this fragment represents the second-century document referred to by Serapion and others (see, for example, Paul Foster, “Are There Any Early Fragments?”), but for many, the “Akhmîm fragment” is perfectly identifiable as such (for such a defence, based on the fact that from the second to the sixth centuries CE the sources are consistent that there was one text of this name, see Timothy Henderson, The Gospel of Peter, p. 14). The text which we now have can be identified as of the “gospel genre” if we take this quite simplistically to mean a text narrating the passion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Moreover, there are indications that the text did also include narrative (e.g. about the disciples – see Gospel of Peter 14.59) which is now lost.

The Gospel of Peter is notable for its conspicuously forgiving portrayal of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who presides over Jesus’s trial, and according to the New Testament Gospels, ultimately decides his fate. This is one feature which begs the question of what kind of relationship the text has with the New Testament Gospels. Is the author deliberately altering the narrative given in the canonical passion narratives to suit particular polemical purposes (such as anti-Jewish rhetoric), or does the text represent a different oral/literary tradition entirely wherein Pilate is viewed more favourably? The earliest scholars of the Gospel of Peter were divided between understanding the text to be independent of the New Testament (so, Adolf von Harnack, Bruchstücke des Evangeliums) or dependent on it (so, Theodor Zahn, Das Evangelium des Petrus). A mid-way approach was later taken by Léon Vaganay (Évangile de Pierre), who believed the Gospel of Peter to be relatively freely composed, and representative of an unsophisticated form of Christianity, from an author without the theological eloquence of the New Testament writers. John Dominic Crossan (“The Gospel of Peter and the Canonical Gospels”) maintains that an earlier version of the text existed, featuring most but not all of what we have in the Akhmîm fragment (termed the “Cross Gospel”), and which New Testament material was added to by a second-century redactor. The issue continues to be debated, but it is clear that for the author of the Gospel of Peter, and, therefore, perhaps we can infer his audience too, emphasising Jewish guilt for Jesus’s death was much more important than understanding it as a Roman decision.

The fragment opens with a scene during the trial of Jesus, where we are told that Herod (Herod Antipas, the Jewish tetrarch) and some other Jews refuse to wash their hands. The immediately preceding text is missing, but it seems to be implied that Pilate, who gets up from his seat upon witnessing this (1.2) has previously washed his own hands (see Timothy Henderson, The Gospel of Peter, p. 57). This is supported by Pilate’s assertion later on in the text that he is “clean from the blood of the Son of God” (11.46). Hans von Schubert was so certain of this that he even added the phrase “Pilate washed his hands” to his 1893 edition of text, prior to what we actually have preserved in the fragment (The Gospel of Peter, p. 4). It seems that the author of the Gospel of Peter is alluding to Matthew’s Gospel, which narrates Pilate washing his hands to symbolise that he is not guilty of Jesus’s blood, when it becomes clear that the crowds will not be satisfied until he condemns Jesus (Matthew 27:24). What is essentially a display of Pilate’s innocence (or at least his desire to be portrayed as such – the Matthean attitude towards Pilate is a matter of debate) in the condemnation of Jesus in Matthew is turned around in the Gospel of Peter to malign
the Jews, emphasising their guilt in Jesus’s death. What we have here is the blatant refusal of Herod and his judges to perform a ritual which cleanses them of having the blood of an innocent man (in the eyes of the author) on their hands (see Tobias Nicklas, “Die ‘Juden’ im Petrusevangelium,” p. 213-214 for a further discussion of the characters in this opening scene of the text). The anti-Jewish polemic is apparent throughout, with abusive behaviour towards Jesus carried out by those commanded by Herod (3.6-9), rather than Roman soldiers as in Mark 15:16-20 and Matthew 27:27-31.

As Jeremiah Johnston explains, the way that Pilate is presented in the Akhmîm fragment is completely in line with the apologetic tendencies of much second-century Christian literature. The excusing portrayal of Pilate, for instance, can also be seen in the late-second-century Acts of Pilate (see especially 1.1.2; 5; 2.1, 5; 4.4; 5.2), where the Roman governor is depicted as an advocate for Jesus, yet the Jewish desire for his unjust death extremely exaggerated (The Resurrection of Jesus, p. 169-172). This makes sense for this early period, when Christianity was in the process of identifying itself as separate from Judaism. Indeed, in the Didache 8-9, Christians are warned not to let their fasting days coincide with those of the “hypocrites” (Jews), nor to pray in the same manner as them, and the Epistle of Barnabas also express early-Christian concern with distancing the church from the erroneous ways of Judaism (Epistle of Barnabas 16, for instance, blames Jewish sin for the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE). Of course, much anti-Jewish rhetoric is prevalent already in the New Testament (e.g. Matthew 27:25 to name a relevant example, where the Jewish people are said to accept responsibility for Jesus’s death).

A similarity can be noted between the outlook of the Gospel of Peter and that of Luke’s Gospel, the only one to involve Herod in Jesus’s trial, and like the Gospel of Peter, quite consistent in its agenda, which reduces Roman guilt and increases that of the Jewish authorities (and the Jewish people more generally) in the sentencing of Jesus to death (see the discussions of Luke 13:1-3; Luke 23:1-7; Luke 23:8-12; Luke 23:13-25). However, the Gospel of Peter goes much farther than even Luke, who still ultimately has Pilate, although reluctant, condemn Jesus. The author of the present text, on the other hand, portrays this decision as coming from Herod (1.2), whose role in the trial is thereby significantly increased. Moreover, when Pilate’s soldiers, assigned to guard Jesus’s tomb at the request of the Jewish elders (8.29-30), report to Pilate that they have witnessed Jesus’s resurrection, we not only see the soldiers proclaiming Jesus as the “Son of God” (11.45), but Pilate too. The extended narrative of the resurrection in the Gospel of Peter, in particular the strange appearance of a walking, talking cross at 39-42 is the subject of much debate, but cannot be dealt with here. What is important for our purposes is that while the soldiers’ testimony of course echoes Mark 15:33-39, Pilate’s proclamation is even more significant, and another example of the increased exoneration of the Roman governor, who is here credited with confirming Jesus’s true identity.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:
Gospel of Peter 1-9; 35-46
Published on Judaism and Rome (http://www.judaism-and-rome.org)

- centurion
- cross
- Herod Antipas
- Jewish elder
- Jewish sin
- Pilate
- resurrection
- Roman governor
- soldier
- son of God
- tetrarch
- trial

Zahn, Theodor, *Das Evangelium des Petrus: Das kürzlich gefundenes Fragment seines Textes* (Erlangen and Leipzig: Deichert, 1898)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

**Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5**

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

- Read more about Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5

Text

**Matthew 27:11-26**

Jesus before Pilate

- Read more about Matthew 27:11-26

Text
Mark 15:33-39

The centurion recognises Jesus as the son of God

- Read more about Mark 15:33-39

Text


Pilate mixes the blood of Galileans with that of sacrifices

- Read more about Luke 13:1-3

Text


Jesus before Pilate

- Read more about Luke 23:1-7

Text

Luke 23:8-12

Jesus before Herod

- Read more about Luke 23:8-12

Text


Jesus is sent back to Pilate

- Read more about Luke 23:13-25

The trampling of Jerusalem by the Gentiles

- Read more about Luke 21:7-28

Text

John 18:28-19:22

Jesus and Pilate

- Read more about John 18:28-19:22

Realized by:

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