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SMOKED TUNAS AND TALKING DOGS: PROBING THE MOTIVES FOR THE ROMAN PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS AS FOUND IN THE ACTS OF PETER

E. ODIN YINGLING

The Apostle Peter is looked upon as one of the greatest figures in budding Christianity. As a result, legends of his death by Roman persecution were circulated in the post–New Testament period in the form of apocryphal gospels. The earliest and most detailed apocryphal gospel describing Peter’s martyrdom is the Acts of Peter (Acts Pet.). In the face of Roman persecution, Peter’s death is looked upon as one of the great enigmas of early Christianity. Are the Roman motives for persecuting Christians mentioned in Acts Pet. historically accurate? Is there truth mingled with the stories of talking dogs and smoked tunas coming back to life?¹ The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether the martyrdom mentioned in Acts Pet. is both an accurate portrayal of Peter’s death as well as the Roman motives which lay behind the Christian persecution. I will argue that in Acts Pet. the Roman incentives for Peter’s martyrdom are a product of late second-century Christian apologetics, and have little bearing on first-century history. This thesis is based on the following propositions. First, the original composition of Acts Pet. is dated to the late second century and is thus probably neither an accurate historical source for Neronian persecution nor a reliable account of Peter’s martyrdom. Second, the motives for persecuting Christians mentioned in Acts Pet. are sufficiently different from established historical sources as to call into question the historical validity of the persecution mentioned in Acts Pet. The persecution mentioned in Acts Pet. is important in understanding a crucial moment in the life of one of Christianity’s most celebrated figures—namely, the apostle Peter.

Although, most commentators have focused more on Peter’s “acts” rather than his martyrdom, I believe that much more could be learned specifically about this text, and how Christian’s viewed Roman persecution by analyzing the martyrdom. While, select passages in the New Testament allude to Peter’s death by crucifixion they are somewhat unclear in their meaning and mention few details (John 21:18–19, 2 Pet 1:13–14). Additionally, none of these passages from the New Testament explicitly say that it was the Romans who executed the apostle Peter, although both the gospel of John and 1 Peter hint that Peter will die the same death as Jesus by crucifixion. In order to see a detailed Christian portrayal of the Roman motives for the martyrdom of Peter we must turn to Acts Pet. which includes a detailed account of Peter’s execution. First, however, the dating of Acts Pet. must be ascertained before one can make claims about the life of the “historical Peter”

**Dating the Original Composition of the Acts of Peter**

In dating Acts Pet. Schneemelcher brings up the fact that Acts Pet. is first mentioned by Eusebius (circa 314–339 C.E.), who condemned it as uncanonical. However, other scholars such as Schmidt and Vouaux have sought to find an earlier attestation to Acts Pet. by searching for it in the Muratorion Canon (hereafter MC). The MC is believed to have been composed around the lat-

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2. Though the martyrdom and the “acts” are now part of one and the same document, source critics believe that they were originally separate. This is due to a lack of homogeneity in philosophical issues and stylistic tendencies. See, for instance, Christine M. Thomas, *The Acts of Peter, Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 30.

3. Jesus told John, ““Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’” (John 21:18) Though the passage in John seems relatively clear that Peter would die by crucifixion, the passage is still subject to scrutiny. Because John appears to have already finished his record in John 20:31, some scholars believe that John chapter 21 is a later redaction. Because, questions on Johannine authorship and redaction criticism of John’s record are beyond the scope of this paper I will assume that John 21 was written by the same author as the previous chapters of John. Also, the question of authorship as it relates to 2 Peter is complicated. Can this passage be relied upon for an historical account of Peter’s death? For example, Bart Ehrman states that “yet other books are pseudonymous—forgeries by people who explicitly claim to be someone else. Included in this group is almost certainly 2 Peter” Ehrman continues by saying, “critical scholars are fairly united today in thinking that Matthew did not write the First Gospel or John the Fourth, that Peter did not write 2 Peter and possibly not 1 Peter.” Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 127. For simplicity, I will treat the question of authorship in 2 Peter in the same way as in the Gospel of John.


5. Ibid.
ter half of the second century, and is the earliest attested list of books which comprised the New Testament. While, the MC does not mention *Acts Pet.* specifically, some scholars still believe that *Acts Pet.* dates to the time of the MC. Both Schmidt and Vouaux cite a very important passage from the MC to support their opinion of an early dating for *Acts Pet.* in which the writer of the Cannon says the following: “Moreover, the acts of all the apostles were written in one book. For ‘most excellent Theophilus’ Luke compiled the individual events that took place in his presence—as he plainly shows by omitting the martyrdom of Peter.” Schmidt believes that the passage in the MC is meant to convey that Luke not only had oral tradition of the death of Peter, but also that Luke had written records of Peter’s martyrdom which he chose not to record.

However, both Elliot and Schneemelcher think that Schmidt is reading too much into this short passage because of the MC’s non-explicit reference to *Act Pet.* Whether by oral or written sources, however, it is clear that by the time of the late second century stories of Peter’s martyrdom were already in circulation. In the end, it seems wise to conclude with Schneelmelcher, Ehrman and Elliot that *Acts Pet.* was written circa 180–190 C.E. This late date is important because if *Acts Pet.* was first written down over a hundred years after the events of Peter’s martyrdom, then many historical elements were probably distorted.

**Roman Motivations for Christian Persecution in the Acts of Peter**

Kereztes has listed a number of different causes for Christian persecution. Among the reasons for the persecution he mentions Christians supposedly starting the fire in Rome in 64 C.E., their having a hostile attitude toward the state, the law itself branding Christians as criminals and corrupt people, a desire to appease the demands of the mob which fed off the idea that if Christianity was illegal it must be immoral, and finally the fact that the Christians were atheists. Janssen supports Kereztes’ evidence for Christian “atheism” by saying that Christians were superstitious and threatened to disturb the peace in Rome and that the introduction of a “new” religion into the Roman Empire would produce national apostasy from traditional religion.

It is understandable that pagans saw Christians as having a hostile attitude

8. Ibid.
toward the state. If pagans believed that the success of the empire was based on the favor of the gods, then it would be natural to see monotheistic Christians as contributors to an increasing disfavor with the gods. However, in contrast to the previously mentioned motivations for persecution mentioned in established historical sources, Acts Pet. gives us a more apologetic, and at times entertaining answer to why pagans persecuted Christians. One of the reasons mentioned for Christian persecution in Acts Pet. can be seen in the story of King Agrippa and a friend of the emperor named Albinus. After the wives of Agrippa heard Peter’s message they refused to consort with him. Agrippa then told his consorts that he would “destroy [them] and burn him (Peter) alive” (Acts Pet. 33). Also, a friend of the emperor named Albinus loses his wife Xanthipe, who takes on vows of absolute chastity due to the preaching of Peter. His reaction is similar to Agrippa’s for he began “raging like a beast” (Acts Pet. 34) and intending to kill Peter. According to the text multitudes of newly converted non-cohabiting women were added daily to the Christian congregation. In the end, the text says that the “official” governmental reason Peter is condemned to death is for being an atheist. In general, the author of Acts Pet. appears to be trying to convince their audience that the real reasons for persecution has nothing to do with law, but rather the lechery of Roman leaders. Virtually all these reasons mentioned in Acts Pet. seem to be different from other more historically reliable sources.

Conclusions

Thus, it appears that the Roman motivations for Christian persecution portrayed in Acts Pet. have more to do with early Christian apologetics and miracles stories, and less to do with actualities. The only reason for Christian persecution mentioned in Acts Pet. which is similar to other sources is the crime of “atheism”, which Acts Pet. portrays as a false motivation. Likely, because of Acts Pet.’s late date and divergent “historical” details, its information about the motives for the Roman persecution of the Christians are probably about as reliable as its accounts of talking dogs and smoked tunas being raised from the dead. However, in a sense, these fanciful events were real. They really did exist in the minds of those who believed them. They existed in a real cultural memory. They were events in the memories of second-century Christians who cherished Acts Pet.