

*Was the Apostle Peter the First Pope?*

**T**HE *LIBER PONTIFICALIS*, WRITTEN BY AN unknown author between 514 - 530 C.E., attempted to catalog a list of bishops of Rome from the Apostle Peter on down to his own time. This catalog was in part based on an earlier version, known as the *Liberian Catalog*, which was a part of a larger work known as the *Chronographer of 354*.<sup>399</sup> It is recognized by scholars that the *Liber Pontificalis* is an admixture of conflicting sources, and therefore difficult to interpret satisfactorily.<sup>400</sup>

One common feature about these two lists is that they both claim that the Apostle Peter was a presiding bishop of Rome for a period of some 25 years,<sup>401</sup> from 42 to 67 C.E.<sup>402</sup> Thereafter, Peter is supposedly followed by a bishop by the name of Linus. After Linus, the two lists disagree as to who followed whom – the *Liber Pontificalis* states that it was Cletus, followed by Clement, whereas, the *Liberian Catalog* states that it was Clement, followed by Cletus. We will now attempt to make some sense out of the data that is contained therein and other accounts, which will not only answer the question offered by the heading, but offer a new

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<sup>399</sup> Raymond Davis, tr., *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989). Davis provides the *Liberian Catalogue* in his appendix 1, 93-6.

<sup>400</sup> For a good discussion on all the various papal lists, see Daniel Wm O'Connor, "The Papal Lists of Hegesippus, Irenaeus, Epiphanius, Julius Africanus, and Eusebius," in *Peter in Rome* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 27-35.

<sup>401</sup> John Wenham, "The Date of Peter's Going to Rome" in *Redating Matthew, Mark & Luke* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 146-72, gives reasons for accepting this 25 year stay of Peter in Rome. We believe, however, that the 25 year period marked Peter's initial visit in 42 C.E. and his final one in 67 C.E., rather than one continuous stay in Rome during that 25 year period.

<sup>402</sup> In order to appreciate the kind of material we are dealing with in these two sources, we note that the *LP (Liber Pontificalis)* states that Peter came to Rome during the time of Nero, yet, on the other hand, [borrowing obviously from the *LC, Liberian Catalogue*] it states that Peter was in Rome during the reigns of Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius and Nero. Since Tiberius died in 37 C.E., the 42 C.E. date is impossible. The author of the *LP* obviously borrowed from the erroneous chronology of the *LC*, which reckoned the 25 years of Peter as being from 30 to 55 C.E.

arrangement of the first bishops of Rome that finally makes sense out of the data.

Common to both lists is the fact that Linus was indeed a bishop of Rome, but he did not succeed Peter – he is recorded as preceding him. The *Liber Pontificalis* clearly states that Peter suffered martyrdom “in the 38th year after the Lord suffered” (i.e., 68 C.E.), whereas Linus “was bishop in the time of Nero from the consulship of Saturninus and Scipio (56 C.E.) to that of Capito and Rufus (67 C.E.).”<sup>403</sup>

Linus had been bishop of Rome for eleven years, dating back to the year 56 C.E. Now understand this amazing fact. It was in the spring of 56 C.E., by our chronology, that the Apostle Paul had just arrived in Rome for a two year house arrest before his trial. This fact, by itself, would imply that it was the Apostle Paul who was responsible for the ordination of Linus at the time of his arrival in Rome.<sup>404</sup> At last, we have history and tradition unitedly agreeing to give us a true picture of the past.

The eleven years accorded to Linus now make perfect sense if he held office from the time that Paul arrived in Rome in 56 C.E. until just before Peter was martyred in 68 C.E. Then, some time before Peter was martyred in Rome on February 22, 68 C.E., Peter ordains Clement as the second bishop of Rome, succeeding not himself, but rather Linus, the real first bishop of Rome. And this is exactly in agreement with the testimony that we have in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. Indeed, it is in this earlier account that we have a more believable tradition of who were the first bishops of all the various cities in the first century:

Now concerning those bishops which have been ordained in our lifetime, we let you know that they are these: – James the bishop of Jerusalem, the brother of our Lord; upon whose death the second was Simeon the son of Cleopas; after whom the third was Judas the son of James. Of Caesarea of Palestine, the first was Zacchaeus, who was once a publican; after whom was Cornelius, and the third Theophilus. Of Antioch, Euodius, ordained by me Peter; and Ignatius by Paul. Of Alexandria, Annianus was the first, ordained by Mark the evangelist; the second Avilius by Luke, who was also an evangelist. Of the church of Rome, Linus the son of Claudia was the first, ordained by Paul; and Clemens, after Linus’ death, the second, ordained by me Peter (*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 4:46 [ANF 7:477-8]).

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 2. Notice that 38 years after the crucifixion only works with a crucifixion date of 30 C.E., and not, as a few suggest, and the majority reject, in 33 C.E.

<sup>404</sup> Cletus, who appears second in the list of the *Liber Pontificalis*, seems to have been correctly placed third in the list after Clement in the *Liberian Catalog*. Indeed, in the *LC*, Cletus is seemingly a misfit, squeezed in between Linus and Clement. The *Liberian Catalog* evidence certainly has the merit of alleviating this quandary.

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Notice carefully that Linus is here considered to be the first bishop of Rome, then followed by the second bishop of Rome, Clement, who was ordained by the Apostle Peter. This testimony obviously reflects the earliest tradition and therefore should be preferred over the conflicting traditions of Irenaeus and Eusebius. And it is this testimony that agrees with exactly what we have seen in both in the *Liber Pontificalis* and the *Liberian Catalogue*, that Linus was bishop ten years before Peter came to Rome.

Further support of our thesis is to be found in Tertullian (ca. 160 - ca. 225), who claims to have been an actual eyewitness to the registries of the churches of Smyrna and of Rome. Tertullian recorded that:

For this is the manner in which the apostolic churches transmit their registers: as the church of Smyrna, which records that Polycarp was placed therein by John; as also the church of Rome, which makes Clement to have been ordained in like manner by Peter (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 1:22 [ANF 3:258]).

Tertullian is said to have been a lawyer and was especially interested in getting his facts straight by the official records. His testimony, therefore, is extremely important in settling this matter. From this piece of evidence we can see that in the time of Tertullian, the official register of the church at Rome recorded that it was Peter who ordained Clement. And if that is so, then Clement was ordained before February 68 C.E.

We now go to the pseudo-clementine literature, where another tradition confirms that Clement himself supposedly explains that he was ordained directly by the Apostle Peter:

But about that time, when he [Peter] was about to die, the brethren being assembled together, he suddenly seized my hand, and rose up, and said in presence of the church: "Hear me, brethren and fellow-servants. Since, as I have been taught by the Lord and Teacher Jesus Christ, whose apostle I am, the day of my death is approaching, I lay hands upon this Clement as your bishop; and to him I entrust my chair of discourse even to him who has journeyed with me from the beginning to the end" (*Epistle of Clement to James 2* [ANF 8:218]).

At the end of the fourth century, Rufinus of Aquileia commented on this very passage in the following terms:

There is a letter in which this same Clement writing to James the Lord's brother, gives an account of the death of Peter, and says that he has left him as his successor, as

ruler and teacher of the church. ...Linus and Cletus were Bishops of the city of Rome before Clement. How then, some men ask, can Clement in his letter to James say that Peter passed over to him his position as a church-teacher. The explanation of this point, as I understand, is as follows. Linus and Cletus were, no doubt, Bishops in the city of Rome before Clement, but this was in Peter's lifetime; that is, they took charge of the episcopal work, while he discharged the duties of the apostolate (Rufinus, *Clem. Recogn.* NANF 3:564).

It is obvious that Rufinus accepts the tradition of Irenaeus in making Linus and Cletus to come before Clement, but he must admit that they actually were bishops together during Peter's lifetime. Irenaeus (ca. 130 - ca. 200) appears to be the one who started the tradition that Linus and Cletus followed Peter in succession, but even he betrays this conviction if we notice carefully what he says about Clement:

The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate. Of this Linus, Paul makes mention in the Epistle to Timothy (2 Tim 4:21). To him succeeded Anacletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was allotted the bishopric. This man, as he had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them, might be said to have the preaching of the apostles [of Peter and Paul] still echoing [in his ears], and their tradition before his eyes (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.3 [ANF 1:416]).

It would be hard to imagine that Clement would still have the message of the apostles still ringing in his ears when he assumed the office of bishop if he only attained that office a quarter century after these apostles had passed from the scene. The letter of Clement to the Corinthians exuberates with recent recollections of both Paul and Peter. Indeed, the reference to the church envoy Fortunatus in Clement (1 Clem 65:1) is obviously the very same Fortunatus who was an envoy in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 16:17).<sup>405</sup>

Clement was a fellow worker with Paul in Rome and is mentioned by Paul in his first imprisonment at Rome (Phil 4:3), which by our dating, extended from 56 to 58 C.E. The fact that Clement was a contemporary of

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<sup>405</sup> Although not impossible, we feel that this seems very unlikely that a quarter century would have passed with the same envoy (or a coincidental namesake) still carrying on the same task. Indeed, what is staring us in the face is testimony that the two are one in the same person and, therefore, *First Clement* must be lowered in date to the same generation as that of the Apostle Paul.

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Paul in the late fifties makes it more likely that he was an active leader in the church during the next decade, and not some four decades later.

Also, if the Apostle John was now residing in Ephesus, even on down to the late nineties of the first century, it makes no sense that Clement would not defer the Corinthian matter to John the apostle, who was only some 300 miles away, rather than to rebuff John, and take the matter into his own hands, who was some 700 miles away.<sup>406</sup> This fact alone would necessitate the fact that the time of writing of *First Clement* should be lowered from 95/6 C.E. to about 69/70 C.E., just prior to the arrival of John in Ephesus.<sup>407</sup>

Even the entry in the *Liber Pontificalis* for Clement specifically states that Clement was bishop “in the time of Galba and Vespasian from the consulship of Trachalus and Italicus [68] to the 9th of Vespasian and that of Titus [79].”<sup>408</sup> Notice that Clement begins his reign in the same year as Peter dies. This perfectly coincides with exactly what we have been presenting here. And also note that if this tradition is in anyway true, then Clement was not even alive in 95 C.E. and his *Epistle to the Corinthians* could not have been written any earlier than 79 C.E.

After Clement, it appears that the *Liberian Catalog* has correctly placed Cletus as being the third bishop of Rome: “He [Cletus] was bishop in the time of Vespasian and Titus and the beginning of Domitian from 77 to 83.”<sup>409</sup> Then follows Anaclitus (84-95), Evaristus (96-108), Alexander (109-116), and then Xystus (117-126), after which there seems to be agreement between the two lists.<sup>410</sup>

Now to answer our question, was Peter the first Pope? It appears that the whole purpose of the *Liber Pontificalis* was manufactured to establish just such a fact. But it is also obvious that much of the early data in this work is pure invention for this very purpose. However, one thing is certain. The first bishop of Rome was a person by the name of Linus, not the Apostle Peter at all. And from this evidence it appears that Linus was ordained by the Apostle Paul in 56 C.E. and was never the second bishop

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<sup>406</sup> Dr. Ernest L. Martin makes mention of this fact in his book, *Restoring the Original Bible* (Portland, Oreg., Associates for Scriptural Knowledge, 1994), 418-420, but has the chronology wrong. I had the chance to discuss this fact personally with Dr. Martin in November, 2000 at the convention for the Society of Biblical Literature in Nashville, Tennessee. After I had presented to him my chronology he said that he felt that what I suggested was right and that he would address this in a future publication. Unfortunately, Dr. Martin died in January, 2002, without having provided us with his insight on this matter.

<sup>407</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 352, dates 1 Clement at 70 C.E.

<sup>408</sup> Davis, *Liber*, 3. Modern scholars, however, prefer to follow Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.15, 34, who dates Clement as holding office from 92-101 C.E.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*

of Rome following Peter in 68 C.E.

The idea that Peter was in Rome as bishop for some 25 years also seems to fall apart, just on the evidence that when Paul wrote to the Romans in 54 C.E., he salutes everyone that he can think of, the longest list of salutes in all of his letters, mentioning everyone from his relatives to prominent people, yet the highest ranking apostle in the church receives not the slightest mention. This evidence, to this author, is conclusive enough to say that if Peter was in Rome at this time, then this apparent *faux pas* would represent a slight to the chief apostle that would be entirely inexplicable.<sup>411</sup>

We must remember that Peter, like all the apostles, was an itinerant evangelist, so to speak, not a stationary overseer or bishop of any single congregation.<sup>412</sup> The later Catholic Church seized upon the fact that Peter went to Rome in his final year of his life and from this fact apparently drew up a history that to them established a basis for the bishop of Rome to be the supreme bishop over all other bishops within Christendom. The church of the fourth century, therefore, drew up a scenario that suited this premise. However, we should not ignore the facts. The testimony of Eusebius (ca. 260 - ca. 340) concerning Peter was that:

Peter seems to have preached in Pontus, Galatia and Bithynia, Cappadocia and Asia, to the Jews of the Dispersion. Finally, he came to Rome where he was crucified, head downwards at his own request (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.1.2).

Peter worked among the Jews of the dispersion, not among the Gentiles of Rome. Indeed, we should ask the important question, what does it mean when Eusebius says that Peter “*finally* came to Rome?” It means just as the most reliable history tells us – that Peter only recently arrived in Rome in the final year of his life, pure and simple. And, although this may be exactly 25 years from Peter’s first visit, there is no evidence that Peter remained in Rome throughout that 25 year period in the role of a bishop of that city.

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<sup>411</sup> Although Peter may have journeyed to Rome in 42 C.E., he did not stay there as a bishop. If some of the converts that Paul addressed in his Epistle to the Romans were the result of Peter’s work some twelve years earlier, then it is understandable why Paul expressed in his letter to the Romans his reluctance to build upon another man’s foundation (Rom 15:20).

<sup>412</sup> We should also note that tradition has it that Peter ordained Euodius as the first bishop of Antioch (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3:22). If this is so, then why was not Peter considered the first bishop of Antioch and Euodius as the second bishop of Antioch? The answer is that the bishops of Antioch were not concerned with drawing up a list to establish its primacy, only Rome was.

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Also, consider that if Peter was a bishop and he ordained a successor, then by that very act he would have divested his own authority as bishop to his successor. C. De Lisle Shortt observes in this regard:

As St. Peter was an Apostle, he could not lay down his office of bishop, if he ever was such, nor could he adopt another to preside over the See of Rome with him, or to succeed him. Innocent I., bishop of Rome, condemned such actions as irregular and as never known before his time. In his epistle to the clergy and people of Constantinople he says: "We have never known these things to have been daringly attempted by our fathers, but rather to have been hindered; for no one hath any right entrusted to him to ordain another in the place of one living" (*P. Innoc. I. apud Soz. viii. 26.*)<sup>413</sup>

Also, note that Irenaeus stated that:

The Roman Church was founded by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter *and* Paul (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.2 [*ANF* 1:415]).

If anything, the Apostle Paul, *the* apostle to the Gentiles, was more of an actual contributor to the establishment of the Roman church than Peter ever was. Indeed, it was Paul who ordained the first bishop of Rome in 56 C.E. — eleven years before Peter arrived in Rome before his martyrdom in 68 C.E.

Therefore, our answer to the question, "Was Peter the first Pope?" is a simple one based on the evidence. Peter was never a bishop in the first place, let alone a "Pope" in the modern sense. He was an apostle who ordained bishops in various cities, not just Rome. The idea that Peter was the first bishop of Rome was a later construction invented to establish the See of Rome as the ultimate authority over all other churches within Christianity. But such a concept was never the intention of the original apostles.

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<sup>413</sup>C. De Lisle Shortt, *Who Was the First Bishop of Rome?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1935), 169.