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EVIDENCE FOR THE MARTYRDOM OF PETER AND PAUL IN ROME

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THE questions as to whether Peter and Paul were martyred together in the city of Rome, in what sense they can be said to have founded the church there, and whether Peter ever visited Rome are for many reasons highly controversial. Indeed they may be said to be battlegrounds on which the great debate on the authority of the Roman see has been repeatedly fought. But the purpose of this paper is in no sense controversial, its object being to raise the point as to the comparative value of tradition and documentary evidence, and my reason for selecting so dangerous a topic is that it is exceptionally useful because the voice of tradition is well nigh unanimous, and the evidence itself exceptionally weak.

By the close of the second century these were accepted facts. (1) that Peter and Paul had founded the church of Rome and made Linus its first bishop. This is the statement of Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, an Asiatic who had visited Rome. If he, as is supposed, was in Rome at the time of the martyrdom of Polycarp, i. e. the middle of the second century, his information must have been due to a much earlier belief. This tradition must consequently be admitted as good. (2) A little later the tombs of Peter on the Vatican and of Paul on the Ostian way were shown to visitors to Rome. This we learn from Eusebius on the authority of Gaius, who may possibly be Hippolytus. (3) That Peter was at Rome, and that Mark embodied his teaching in his Gospel. This, as is well

known, is the testimony of Clement of Alexandria. (4) That Peter was crucified and Paul beheaded as Tertullian records. (5) That Peter was, according to Origen who visited Rome, crucified head downwards. Admitting that the tradition is satisfactory, we may acknowledge that it was regarded as an accepted fact that Peter and Paul had founded the Roman church, that they had both been crowned with Martyrdom, and that their tombs were believed to be outside the City. And not only so; but no other place has laid claim to be the scene of the sufferings of the great Apostles. As this was the belief of the Christian church in most parts of the world at the close of the second century, there is no need to discuss any later testimony. It must further be conceded that these beliefs were not new at the time they were received.

Granted, however, that the tradition is a good one, we may now proceed to trace it backward from Irenaeus and see how far it can be substantiated by the documentary evidence at our disposal.

The widespread and popular belief was that Peter went to Rome to refute Simon Magus, the first enemy of the Faith, who had endeavoured to corrupt it by his own claim to divinity, and to pervert it into a gnostic system. Every writer against Gnosticism singled out Simon for special refutation, not only because he is mentioned in Acts, but as the most dangerous of heretics. Any one who had even a hearsay knowledge of Peter's refutation of Simon at Rome would be sure to mention it. Yet Justin Martyr, who tells of the statue of Simon (i. e. the god Semo Sancus) which he had seen at Rome, says nothing of his encounter with Peter, nor does Irenaeus, who obviously copied Justin, and probably had his lost work on heresies before him.

From Justin Martyr we may go back a generation or so to Ignatius who, like Justin, suffered in Rome. The most learned students of church history have regarded his statement in the letter to the Romans as a proof that Peter was at Rome. But let us recall the exact words. They are not easy to translate and the whole letter is entirely rhetorical. Noble as is the writers yearning to lay down his life for his

Lord, it must be admitted that his zeal is expressed in the turgid words of unrestrained enthusiasm. Ignatius fears that the mistaken zeal of the Roman church may by their intercession deprive him of the glory of martyrdom. They must not save his life by any "unseasonable kindness," they must rather entice the beasts to consume him. Let them become his tomb, etc.

I do not lay any command on you as a Peter or a Paul. They were Apostles, I am a condemned criminal. They were free, thus far I am but a slave. But if I suffer I shall be the freedman of Jesus Christ.

This is taken as evidence to prove that Ignatius believed that the Romans must have known that Peter and Paul were at Rome and were martyrs there, or he would not have mentioned them. But of whom else could he have spoken? He himself was going to be a conspicuous martyr. Throughout his long journey he had been respectfully received by the churches. The authorities had singled him out to testify openly to Christ at Rome; even his own church at Antioch had been left unmolested when he was removed. Well may he have warned his friends at Rome that he was not able to speak as the two greatest apostles of whom all the Christian world had heard. And mark, he does not say "Peter and Paul, who, as I am about to do, suffered in your city." Surely it is straining the point to maintain that this is evidence.

Then we come to the so called first epistle of Clement which is popularly attributed to this father, but is written in the name of the Roman church. Here we need to question neither the genuineness nor the date. We may assume that it belongs to the age of the so called Domitian persecution and was therefore written to the Corinthians before A. D. 96. But granting this, does it prove any more than the statement of Ignatius that both Peter and Paul died the death of Martyrs at Rome? The letter, if less turgid in style than that of Ignatius, is as rhetorical. The writers are warning their correspondents against a faction whose jealousy is ruining their church. They are heaping up examples of the harm it has done. The factious spirit of jealousy has overthrown cities and uprooted nations. In the Old Testament 'jealousy' caused

all the troubles of the righteous. Abel, Jacob, Moses all suffered because of the jealousy of others. Aaron and Miriam, Dathan and Abiram were punished for indulging in this sin. David endured not only the jealousy of strangers but of Saul. Peter and Paul were the victims of 'jealousy'.

On account of unholy jealousy Peter did not endure one nor two, but many trials, and passed as a martyr (*μαρτυρος*) to the place of glory as his due.

Notice the vagueness of the language. There is no hint as to how Peter suffered or where; and it is quite possible the Romans did not know. Of Paul the letter is more explicit. He was seven times in bonds; he was stoned; he became a herald of the Gospel in East and West; in the utmost limits of the West he gave his testimony before rulers and passed from the world—the great example of patient long suffering. The letter shows a knowledge of Paul and of his Epistles, and yet is vague as to the place of his death. Taken literally it might imply that he suffered in Spain! But we know Paul went to Rome; and it is most likely he was martyred there; for, whether the Pastoral Epistles are his or not, II. Timothy antedates I. Clement, and was accepted as by Paul very early. Yet the testimony of this letter, which may be regarded as the last testament of Paul, makes it more difficult than ever to prove that Peter and Paul ever met in the imperial city. Of Paul's silence in his undoubted epistles nothing need here be said.

Lastly, there is the testimony of archaeology; and here almost every one follows Lanciani, who declares that the testimony of the catacombs conclusively proves that Peter visited Rome but produces no real evidence of the fact. He goes in truth just as far as this paper goes and no further, by proving that before the second century had closed the entire Christian world admitted that the church of Rome was the foundation of SS. Peter and Paul.

Thus we find side by side the strength of tradition and the weakness of the evidence. Are we to reject the general belief of the Christian world held since, say, AD 150 or earlier? One thing is certain, the tradition is not the result of Roman

ambition. Irenaeus, Dionysius of Corinth, Hegesippus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen are all foreigners. The two Roman names, Gaius and Hippolytus, are somewhat shadowy—even Eusebius did not know where Hippolytus' see was. As for Clement, his so called epistle was hardly noticed by the Roman church, but was highly honoured in the East. The Clement of legend came from Rome, it is true, but he was with Peter in Syria. The same obscurity hangs over the whole history of the Roman church. What we know of any of its bishops down to the peace of the church is from outside. Not one martyr's name in the Neronian or Domitian persecution is known, and few indeed before the days of Decius, 251. How the church rose to power is as doubtful, as that it did attain to a supremacy is certain. Yet the catacombs bear witness to the extent and even the high social position of Roman Christianity. That Peter and Paul jointly founded the church is well nigh incredible: that they appointed a man so little known as Linus is from his very obscurity highly probable. That Peter never went to Rome was asserted even in the uncritical days of the fourteenth century. But there is an epigram which may be even earlier. In the days when offices were bought and sold, some one wrote:

An Petrus Romae fuerit sub iudice lis est,
Simonem Romae nemo fuisse negat.

Peter ne'er was at Rome there are some who declare,
But no one denies that a Simon (sc. Magus?) was there.