

Excerpt from *Simon, Who Is Called Peter*.

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Foreword

by Matt Jenson

The welcome return in the last decade to the theological interpretation of Scripture finds the academic study of the Bible back on the same road with God's people, who have always read Scripture in light of their conviction that Jesus is Lord. But for theological interpretation to continue on that road, it needs to remember that doctrine serves discipleship. A fully faithful interpretation of Scripture arises from the church's worship of Jesus as Lord (*lex orandi lex credendi*) and leads to the church's ongoing formation as a community of disciples who follow that same Lord.

All of which to say, the theological interpretation of Scripture for the formation of disciples involves and requires what Richard Hays calls a "conversion of the imagination."¹ Paul exhorts us to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind," (Rom. 12:2), underscoring the close parallel between habits of mind and a way of life. The life of the mind is to a great extent, perhaps chiefly, the life of the imagination.² And if the conversion of the imagination occurs over a lifetime and through countless encounters, one tried-and-true approach is the immersion of the imagination in the Scriptures.

This is what Mackenzie Mulligan gives us in *Simon, Who is Called Peter*—an imaginative immersion in Peter's life in Peter's own voice. It's no secret that first-person narration involves one in an identification with the narrator, an identification in which we enter into the reality of the situation and experience through Peter's eyes—yet with our own—what it must have been like to meet Jesus for the first time, to stumble upon this enigmatic figure who attracts and repels, who meets, confounds, and surpasses expectations, who draws one into his life in such a way that one's own life is utterly undone, only to be given back fresh, transfigured.

Mulligan describes his Peter as "the Peter of the Bible." This is meant to stand over-against attempts to reconstruct a Peter "behind" the text of Scripture, or (whether consciously or no) simply from the fancies of one's own imagination. One certainly need not choose between critical and theological interpretation of Scripture, but still one must—at least if one seeks to continue in the Christian tradition of reading the Bible with and for the church—submit one's

¹ Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination*.

² See here Hart, *Between the Image and the Word*, and his forthcoming 3-volume *Poetics of Redemption*, beginning with *Making Good*. On the centrality of the imagination in Christian education toward the ordering of love, see Smith's Cultural Liturgies Project, the first two volumes of which are *Desiring the Kingdom* and *Imagining the Kingdom*.

interpretation to Jesus, the Lord of all, even hermeneutics. If, as the church confesses, it is the Spirit of the same Lord who inspired and illumines Scripture, and if it is the same Spirit who conforms us to the image of the Son according to the will of the Father (Rom. 8:29), then the church has been right to find in the Bible one of its chief means of grace.

In keeping with this, Mulligan offers his “Peter of the Bible” as an auxiliary to this means of grace. Yet we might ask why we need a Peter of the Bible; don’t we already have one, precisely in the pages of Scripture? He fills out the biblical portrait but refuses to fill in the gaps in Peter’s life. Someone else might take up the project of a partly fictional literary biography in which they sketch a possible life for Peter that takes us beyond the pages of Scripture. What was he like as a child? How did he become a fisherman? Did he have kids? What else could we imagine him doing over the course of his apostolic ministry? But Mulligan refuses to tell Peter’s story this way. Such an anti-speculative move keeps his reader’s eyes trained on the biblical Peter, guiding us deeper into, but never away from, Scripture’s own testimony to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the life of his disciple. While Mulligan is scrupulous to avoid speculation, sticking to the events recorded in the Bible, he wagers that, as he trains his spotlight on the character of Peter and moves others into the background, and as he lingers longer than Scripture itself over this galvanized and galvanizing disciple, his readers will see the good news differently. Call this the Word made strange, in order that it may be heard anew.³

Perhaps we can best characterize this, then, as an extended meditation, a form of *lectio divina* in which the text being read is the life of a man in the pages of Scripture. Mulligan has poured over the biblical accounts of Peter, sifted them, seen the threads that unite them, and, just as importantly, mulled over the emotional and spiritual dynamics present. It is something of a saint’s life, though differing from traditional hagiography in its resolute realism; Peter sins more than most saints. Here, too, we find “the Peter of the Bible,” and there are few more compelling arguments for the goodness and grandeur of God than his recruitment and retention of such a motley crew of representatives. This also ought to commend the trustworthiness of the Bible.

As a meditation, then, Mulligan gives us a *synopsis*—literally, a seeing together—of the events of Peter’s life as they are scattered throughout the New Testament. This *synopsis* allows us to perform an *autopsy*, as we see for ourselves who this Rock, the one on whom Christ has built his church, was. He shows his work, too, with extensive footnotes demonstrating his sensitive harmonization of the biblical texts alongside a number of commentaries, judiciously sorting the perspectives and making appropriate judgments. For many, the biblical terrain will be familiar; but even so, Mulligan’s turns out to be the Peter you never knew.⁴

Who was he? Of course, he was many things; but what strikes me most on reading Mulligan’s work is that this is a Peter who is himself *surprised*. He is surprised—again and

³ This title is borrowed from a different context in Milbank’s *The Word Made Strange*.

⁴ With apologies to Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*.

again—at Jesus. Jesus continues to do things that, in the words of Wendell Berry, “won’t compute.”⁵ We watch the disciples in condescending amusement, wondering how they could fail to see who Jesus was, even after watching him perform miracles. And so we betray our own self-deception, our own remedial position in the school of discipleship. Peter thus serves as a mirror of discipleship. By witnessing Peter’s continual state of shock at Jesus, perhaps something of Jesus’ very strangeness will dawn on us, too. Perhaps *we* will be surprised.

Peter is surprised by himself, too. He is caught off guard by his faithlessness, baffled and buried under shame. Then later, he is surprised by the Spirit—at the way the Spirit brings sudden courage and clarity at Pentecost. And because of the Spirit, Peter is surprised by his own faithfulness to the end, by the unanticipated ease of following the way of Jesus to martyrdom.

My hope, and indeed my prayer, is that readers will find themselves surprised, too, as they read this book—surprised by the life of Peter, yes, but even more surprised by the arresting eloquence of God’s Word, the Word made flesh. In this way we find ourselves committed to an *imitatio Petri* that is itself an *imitatio Christi*.

⁵ And fittingly so. This is one of a number of injunctions that conclude with the summary command to “practice resurrection” in Berry’s poem “Manifesto,” 173-174.

Introduction

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Matthew 16:18

In my years as a churchgoer, I've heard about a lot of different "Peters." I've heard of Peter the Faithful Fisherman, abandoning his business to follow an obscure rabbi. I've heard of Peter the Wise, who recognizes Jesus for who and what he is. I've even heard of Peter the Preacher, saving 3,000 souls by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, it is not always so positive. More often than not, the sermon touches on Peter the Doubter, sinking in the waves; or Peter the Fool, cutting off a man's ear in an olive grove; or Peter the Coward, denying his Master.

And as I heard of all these different Peters, I began to wonder: How can all of these be the same person? How can the Peter who leaves his entire life behind for Jesus and spends three years side-by-side with the Son of God, be the same man who utterly fails to understand Jesus' purpose? How can the Peter who walks on water by faith be the same Peter who sinks by doubt?

So who is Peter? Who is this person walking at the side of Christ, leading the early Church, capable of such great faith and such great faithlessness? Who is this person who Jesus took such great care to re-name, to re-create? The answer is at once complicated and simple, and one we can easily overlook and forget.

Simon Peter is a man. He is not an object lesson or a parable, told merely to prove a point, but a man who fished the waters of the Sea of Galilee, who walked through the dusty streets of Capernaum and Jerusalem, who followed an obscure rabbi he believed to be the Messiah.

At his core, he is a weak man who wants desperately to be strong for Christ, a foolish man who wants desperately to be wise for Christ, and a frightened man who wants desperately to be brave for Christ. Sometimes he fails. Sometimes he succeeds.

And at every moment of his life, whether standing on the mountaintop with Christ, or weeping in the darkness while his Lord is led to execution, he stands where countless Christians have since stood. In the life of Peter, more so than any other New Testament figure, we see the stark contrast between sin's corruption and the redeeming grace and love of Christ.

And that means that there is significant value in the study of his life, in the study of the man and the world he lived in. This is not a project to discover the "real" Peter, the Peter "behind" the Biblical account (as though the Biblical account were unreliable). Any Peter arrived at by that method would simply be the Peter of my own imagination. Nor is this primarily an attempt to "fill in the gaps," for such projects easily cross the line from scholarship and knowledge into irresponsible speculation.

No: This is the Peter of the Bible. As you read, you will see Peter's world through his eyes. You will witness Christ as Peter did, worshiping and loving someone he does not yet understand. You will walk across the waves with Peter, and sink with him too. You will hear Peter preach at Pentecost, stand with him as he addresses the council in Jerusalem, and

experience Paul's rebuke in Antioch. You will witness Peter's brokenness, and so recognize your own . . . and then you will see the grace of Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and who has chosen to use such stones as us for his Church.

We Were Only Fishermen

Rome, 50-60 AD

"I will soon put off this body," I whisper, as I do every day upon awakening in this prison cell.⁶ It is always damp in these cells, and I shiver in my thin robe. I rise slowly, and as I push myself up with shaking hands I am reminded: I am old. Soon, what the Lord told me will come to pass.⁷ The scars from years of fishing pull at my palms as I raise them up to pray, and I say the words that the Lord Jesus taught us so many years ago: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." I'd heard the Father's voice, once, on a mountain, the day Moses and Elijah came and talked with Jesus. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread . . ." And he did. Every day, the food came—of course, it wasn't really bread, but still sufficient. "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." *I swear that I do not know the man! Simon, son of John, do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know I love you.* "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen."

I lower my eyes and my hands, both raised towards heaven, and look around the small cell. There isn't much to look at. A stone slab, both for sitting and sleeping. A pot in one corner. And in another corner a pile of papyri, the oldest of them already starting to decay in the perpetual damp. Letters. Paul is here, somewhere, in Rome. I have not been allowed to see him. Mark and Silvanus have, however, and they have brought me copies of his messages to the Church.

The Spirit of God has given him great wisdom. He is like the prophets of old: bold, inspired, and often confusing. When he used to visit me, Mark would often have questions about them, and I would do my best to answer them with the words God gave me.⁸

I have written two letters myself, with much care and trouble . . .⁹ flimsy things compared to Paul's! I chuckle at the comparison, and I praise God for the brothers and sisters I wrote to.

⁶ This sentiment taken from 2 Peter 1:14.

⁷ This is in reference to John 21:18. Almost all commentators view this as a reference to Peter's death.

⁸ In 2 Peter 3:15-16, Peter displays more than a passing familiarity with Paul's letters: he speaks as one who has both read them and counseled others who have read them. See footnote 4 below for a discussion of authorship.

⁹ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 5-7; Jobes, *1 Peter*, 7; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 125; Green, *1 Peter*, 182; Reese, *2 Peter & Jude*, 115-121; Harink, *1 & 2 Peter*, 23. Petrine authorship of the letters bearing his name is hotly contested, with the mention of Silvanus in 1 Peter 5:12 only adding to the flames. Davids details the most common objections to Petrine authorship of 1 Peter in particular—the quality of the Greek ("some of the finest Greek in the whole NT"), the "Paulinisms" contained in 1 Peter, and how Peter would have come into contact with the Christians in Asia Minor. Davids comes to the conclusion that the letter is merely one that "[Peter] authorized

They are blessed, and they have the faith to believe in the Lord Jesus *without* seeing . . . faith I had lacked as a disciple.¹⁰

Mark had been with me then, as my friend and my son.¹¹ He was with me for a long time, listening to my preaching, writing things down to show to others.¹² He is gone, now, gone with Paul's disciple Timothy. Silvanus, too, has gone. Luke is still in Rome, though, and he visits me to talk about the Lord in his days on earth.¹³ He, like Mark, is always writing things down. He says it is important to get the account from "eyewitnesses," as he calls them, so that it will be trustworthy and accurate.¹⁴ That is good.

There is not much to do in this prison cell. I am unable to leave, and now that Mark has left, I do not receive many visitors aside from Luke, and he does not come as often now. I spend most of my time thinking and praying, remembering my time with the Lord. It is all so clear in my mind, every memory clear and fresh. I can hear Jesus' first words to me like they were spoken yesterday . . .

Silvanus to write in his name." However, Jobes analyzes those same objections and come to the opposite conclusion. Regarding the Greek in particular, Jobes states "the Greek of 1 Peter arguably exhibits bilingual interference that is consistent with a Semitic author for whom Greek is a second language." Regardless, recent scholarship is firm in the conclusion that the phrase commonly translated "By Silvanus . . . I have written briefly to you" contains absolutely *no* reference to Silvanus as some sort of "secretary" or scribe, but merely as the courier (see Green, Jobes, and Watson/Callan). Regarding 2 Peter, the consensus holds that Petrine authorship is doubtful, for a myriad of reasons. However, see Reese for an excellent discussion of some of the arguments both for and against Petrine authorship. As for myself, I can only say along with Harink, "[In assuming Peter as the author], I simply follow the canonical text, and then also follow the connections from the Peter of the epistles to the other canonical accounts of Peter in the Gospels and Acts. I assume the theological legitimacy of both of those moves without making a historical-critical judgment one way or another about the authorship of the epistles."

¹⁰ In 1 Peter 1:9, Peter praises the brethren, noting that "though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory." As Peter wrote this verse, it seems nearly certain that he was remembering all the times his own faith had failed him, though Jesus walked at his very side.

¹¹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 322; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 126. In 1 Peter 5:13, Peter refers to "Mark, my son." Jobes states that this refers to John Mark, who appears in Acts 12:12 and elsewhere. Watson/Callan agrees, noting that Mark "may have met Peter when Peter visited Mark's mother's home ([Acts] 12:12)." If this is the case, then Mark is not literally Peter's son, but probably "one who had come to faith through the ministry of Peter" (Watson/Callan).

¹² Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 125; Hengel, *Saint Peter: The Underestimated Apostle*, 47; Helyer, *The Life and Witness of Peter*, Introduction. Hengel relates that Eusebius, a fourth-century church theologian, quotes Papias (1st-2nd centuries AD) as saying that Mark (the author of the Gospel that bears his name) was "the interpreter of Peter, [and] wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered." This view was common for some time, but relatively recently fell out of favor. Even more recently, however, several modern scholars see evidence for it, including Bauckham, Hengel, and Helyer. Hengel and Bauckham, in particular, see evidence in the structure and theology of Mark.

¹³ 2 Timothy 4:11 places Luke in Rome and Mark with or near Timothy.

¹⁴ This thought adopted from Luke 1:2.

Israel, 20-30 A.D. – Bethany “Across the Jordan”¹⁵

“Simon! Simon!” Andrew’s voice jarred me out of my sleep. I turned over and pulled my blanket more tightly around me. I knew he would turn up sooner or later: He had disappeared yesterday afternoon while I was in town buying some bread, and after looking for him, I had just assumed he had found somewhere more comfortable to stay.¹⁶

I seemed to have been right. But why was he in such a hurry?

“Simon!” I could hear his footsteps coming closer. I pulled the blanket over my head, but it was immediately torn away, and suddenly Andrew was frantically pulling me up, trying to get me on my feet, crying “Simon, get up! Come with me! Get *up*, Simon!” He was panting, as though he’d just run a good distance.

I waved him off, slowly getting to my feet. He was moving impatiently, almost shaking. I yawned and said, “What is the matter, Andrew? Where were you yesterday? What has gotten into you?”

“We . . .” He paused, glancing upward as he searched for words. “We have found the Messiah. He is here.”

I froze. I wondered if I were still dreaming, or if I had misheard. I looked at Andrew and searched his face for signs of a joke, but there was nothing: His eyes were wide, his mouth slightly open as his breathing slowed. I began to speak, not even knowing what I would say, but he spoke over me.

“Yesterday, I was with John . . . not the Baptist, but John from back home . . . I mean, we were also with the Baptist . . .” He paused, making sure I understood, and I nodded.

“And suddenly this man walked by, a man John had met before, and he said . . .” Andrew’s eyes unfocused, looking somewhere else as he remembered. “He said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’ And we followed him, and we *spoke* to him, and we asked him where he was staying, and . . . oh, just come and see!”

¹⁵ Cullman, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, 25; Quast, *Peter and the Beloved Disciple*, 27; Morris, *John*, 124; Keener, *John*, 450; Carson, *John*, 147; Köstenberger, “John,” 16. These events are taken from John 1:35-42, modified and expanded from the ESV. Most commentators agree this was Jesus’ first interaction with his disciples, before even their calling at the shore of the Sea of Galilee (see footnote 14 below). Why Andrew is with John the Baptist to hear the pronouncement, while Peter is not, is unknown. Most commentators take it for granted that Peter, too, was a disciple of John the Baptist (see Cullman and Quast). The location is also uncertain. John 1:28 notes that this took place “in Bethany across the Jordan.” Morris notes that the phrase “across the Jordan” is used “to distinguish this locality from the better-known Bethany, which was near Jerusalem.” The exact location is lost, although Keener and Carson posit that it refers to an area of the tetrarchy of Phillip, to the east of the Sea of Galilee. Köstenberger notes that this location “must have been within a day’s journey” of Galilee.

¹⁶ Morris, *John*, 138; Carson, *John*, 156. John 1:39 says that they “stayed with him that day, for it was about the 10th hour.” Many commentators put that at around 4:00 in the evening, and Morris even states that given the late hour, and the desire of the two disciples for a good talk, they most likely spent the night where Jesus was staying. This means that Andrew would not have gone to get Peter until the following morning.

And he grabbed my hand, but I shook it off and finally found my voice. “What are you talking about, Andrew? The Messiah? What do you mean, he is here? Who is he? Where are we going?”

Andrew smiled even wider. “We are going to *him*, Simon. Come on!”

And so I allowed myself to be dragged through the streets to the other side of the town, eventually breaking into a jog at Andrew’s insistence. I tried to learn more, but Andrew refused to explain, insisting that I would understand when I talked to “him.”

And soon we were at a house, crossing the threshold to find . . . nothing extraordinary. Just an ordinary man, dressed in ordinary clothes. He was reclining at the table, but he stood when we entered.

Andrew stepped aside as the man advanced, and he stopped right in front of me. He looked at me, and I felt strange. As though he were looking through me, somehow.

And then he smiled, and he said, “You are Simon, the son of John. You will be called Peter.”¹⁷

Rome

You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Peter. His words echo in my mind every day. I did not know what it meant then. I do not believe I entirely know what it means even now.

I remember those first few days. Learning from Jesus, talking with him, and seeing him tell Nathaniel exactly where he had been when Philip found him.¹⁸ We had never seen anything like it.

Then came the wedding, and he did it again. I chuckle: I still remember standing there, mouth open, watching the cup that *should* have been full of dirty water being handed to the master of the feast. Later on, I had tried it myself, and . . . I have never tasted any wine so delicious, to this day.

Jesus was something we had never seen before. We called him Messiah, we followed him, but we did not know what it meant. And then he had sent us away.¹⁹ He told us to return to

¹⁷ Helyer, *Life and Witness*, Chapter 1. This name change is more significant than many people realize. Helyer notes that that the word “Rock” (translated as “Peter” or “Cephas”), “was not an ordinary personal name in either Hebrew/Aramaic or in Greek.” He is literally calling him a very slight variation of the Aramaic word for rock or stone. However, for the purpose of clarity, I have chosen to keep the name “Peter” rather than simply replacing it in every instance with “Rock” or “Rocky” (as suggested by certain commentators). However, the reader should keep this in mind: Every instance of the name would serve as a reminder of its strangeness.

¹⁸ This exchange between Jesus and Nathaniel is related in John 1:47-51.

¹⁹ Lenski, *John*, 202; Robertson, *Epochs in the Life of Simon Peter*, 20. After the wedding in Cana, recorded in John 2, the disciples apparently went back to fishing for a short time. Lenski reads from John 2:12 and Matthew 4:13 that Jesus actually changed his regular place of residence from Nazareth to Galilee, Capernaum in particular, shortly after the wedding. Robertson stresses that “there is no relapse or loss of faith or of interest on the part of the six disciples. They had avowed their faith in and adherence to Jesus as the Messiah, but they had not given up their

Capernaum and wait. So we did. And even though we did not know what we were waiting for, we knew it was going to be incredible.

regular vocation . . . There is nothing in the Synoptic account that excludes the fact that these men were already disciples of Jesus.”