


# The Innovation of a Master Wonder-worker in the Character of Simon Peter

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Simon Peter undergoes a considerable development from his first introduction in the Gospel of Mark to later narratives, where he gains remarkable miraculous abilities. In Mark, he witnesses Jesus performing numerous miracles without himself being named as the performer of a single one, but in Matthew's Gospel Peter walks on water (Matt 14:22-33), in Acts he heals two paralytics and raises a woman from the dead (Acts 3:1-10; 9:32-42), and in the fourth-century Latin *Acts of Peter*, also known as *Actus Verceilenses*, he makes a dog speak (*Acts Pet.* 9.9-15), miraculously restores a shattered marble statue (11.8-23) and revives several people from the dead (27.1-11; 28.63-66). This article examines how Peter's various miracles contribute to their respective stories, analyses how they reflect the needs of their respective authors, and discusses what they tell us about the use of genre in the narrative tradition about the apostle Peter and his miracles.

## Introduction

The narrative tradition of Peter exists at an intriguing crossroads between memory and innovation, where the earliest stages are likely to be based on the memory of an actual historical figure, but later stages develop into innovative fiction.

The Gospel of Mark, where Peter is first mentioned,<sup>1</sup> is often thought to be part of a

historically oriented genre such as Graeco-Roman biography (Burridge 2018; Bond 2020) or historiography (Collins 1992, 1-38; Becker 2006). Although ancient historiographers took frequent liberties in order to reshape historical data into engaging narratives (Berglund 2016, 207-12; Flower 2022), and although ancient biographers often idealized their protagonist into an admirable character for their audience to imitate (Momigliano 1993, 71-73; Bond 2020, 41-51), both genres aimed to preserve historical memories. The Markan disciples are thus thought to be historical figures (Meier 2001, 41-47, 198-245; Dunn 2003, 327-40; Bockmuehl 2010, 20) whom the Markan author has chosen to depict in a strikingly negative light (Wrede 1971, 129-49, 231-36; de Campos 2021, 1-21) to further his portrayal of Jesus as an attractive and authoritative teacher who was tragically abandoned by his closest followers before his execution (Bond 2020, 190-209).<sup>2</sup> Such a view gives the Markan author

gard Mark as the earliest extant Gospel and as a source of Matthew and Luke (Schnelle 2011; Tuckett 2011).

- 2 Joseph B. Tyson (1961) and Theodore J. Weeden (1968) propose that Mark aimed to deauthorize the apostles in favour of other leaders with a more Markan Christology,

1 The majority of New Testament scholars re-

ample room to arrange what he knew about Peter in a way that served his aims.

The genre of Acts is notoriously difficult to pinpoint. While most scholars suggest various biographical or historiographical sub-genres,<sup>3</sup> Richard I. Pervo (1987, 1–11, 115–38) holds that what Luke accomplished as an inept amateur historian, but a brilliant creative writer, would be more aptly described as a historical novel, where heroic adventures of wonder-working apostles take precedence over the history of how the Christian movement spread into important cities such as Rome and Antioch. And Dennis R. MacDonald (2003, 146–51) maintains that the complex interplay between historical memory, legends, popular preaching and literary creativity in Acts also includes intentional imitation of specific stories from Homer's *Iliad*, in order to create a Christian narrative that could compete successfully with Graeco-Roman mythology.

Pervo's and MacDonald's arguments regarding canonical Acts originate as comparisons with extra-canonical apostle stor-

but Ernest Best (1977) points out that the disciples' misunderstandings are pedagogical tricks to introduce further teaching, and several scholars, including Robert C. Tannehill (1977), Patrick J. Hartin (1993) and Paul L. Danove (2005, 90–126), regard Mark as inviting his audience to identify with the disciples and use their imperfections to reflect on their own ways of following Jesus. As Suzanne Watts Henderson (2006, 241–61) points out, the Markan disciples are not called to accept any particular Christology but to participate in Jesus's mission, and when they fall short, it is because they underestimate the cost of following Jesus and the authority endowed in his followers.

3 See the overviews by Mikeal C. Parsons and Richard I. Pervo (1993, 26–37), Joseph Verheyden (1999, 45–48) and Thomas E. Phillips (2006).

ies such as the *Acts of Peter*, which have long been compared to ancient novels such as Chariton's *Callirhoe* or *An Ephesian Story* by Xenophon of Ephesus. Scholars such as Ernst Dobschütz (1902), Rosa Söder (1932) and Philipp Vielhauer (1978, 693–96, 713–18) argue that ancient novels and apocryphal acts have common interest in erotic love, journeys to foreign lands, exotic phenomena and wonder-working, and an ethical moral to the story. But for the parallel to work, the erotic interest in apostle stories must be thought of as reversed, since these stories feature self-imposed sexual abstinence rather than re-unification of separated lovers. In addition, the scheme is a rather awkward fit for the *Acts of Peter*, where the whole story takes place in Rome and the main conflict is a completely asexual competition of who is the superior wonder-worker – Simon Peter or Simon the magician from Acts 8:4–24 (Achtmeier 2008, 188).

Furthermore, the ancient novel is neither unique in including fiction, nor the only genre to take an interest in the strange and exotic. Fictional biographies of gods, mystical heroes and long-dead historical figures have always existed alongside their more historically trustworthy counterparts (Momigliano 1993, 12, 55–56; Karla 2009), and apostle stories may also be compared to hagiographical martyr acts, another literary category featuring extravagant wonder-workers that grew more fictional over time (Hilhorst 1995). Glenn E. Snyder (2013, 112–20) helpfully suggests that the use of themes and topics from ancient novels may not be enough for apostle stories to be novels, but could constitute a more creative use of the genre in the service of other interests. Foreign lands, exotic phenomena and miracles are also very much at home in the ancient genre of paradoxography, where such sensations were collected from

geographical and natural-historical works and organized geographically and thematically (Christ, Schmid and Stählin 1920, 237–39; Johnson 2006, 174, 177; Geus and King 2018, 431–33).<sup>4</sup>

Using cognitive genre theory – where genres consist of expectations, informed by previous encounters with similar literature, which are used by writers and readers in the mutually calibrated processes of expression and interpretation – any given text could participate in multiple genres simultaneously (Most 2000; Seitel 2003; Berglund 2016, 192–96; Berglund 2020, 117–21; Dinkler 2020). One could therefore hypothesize that Peter’s narrative tradition started out as historiographically oriented biography, but grew more fictional as historical data dried up, and granted the apostle increasing miraculous abilities to satisfy the audience’s interest in paradoxography.

This article looks at the genre participation of the Petrine narrative tradition by analysing the character’s participation in miracle stories. We will observe how the narrative character is developed from a passive observer of Jesus’s miracles in Mark, through an apprentice eager to perform miracles of his own in Matthew and an accomplished healer in Acts, to an impressive master wonder-worker duelling with a dangerous magician in the *Acts of Peter*. We will examine how Peter’s miracles (or lack thereof) contribute to the story and the author’s aims, and discuss what the observations imply for the use of genre in the tradition.

4 Janet E. Spittler (2019) compares the apocryphal acts to one particular paradoxography, the *Physiologus*, and concludes that they share a strong interest in animals, a positive evaluation of the natural world and a strong interest in asceticism.

## Peter the observer

Peter is first introduced in the Gospel of Mark.<sup>5</sup> The Sabbath after he meets Jesus (Mark 1:16–18), he witnesses the healings of a possessed man and his own mother-in-law (1:21–31). As soon as the Sabbath ends, a crowd gathers outside Peter’s door to see Jesus heal every illness in town (1:32–34). Later, Peter watches his neighbours remove his roof to lower a stretcher with a paralytic, whom Jesus quickly gets on his feet (2:1–12).<sup>6</sup> Peter is one of three disciples to witness when Jesus transfigures into shining glory (9:2–8) and one of five people present when he resurrects a dead girl:

- 5 Most scholars date Mark to the period 65–75 CE, which would allow for it to be written after the death of Peter and Paul, as stated by Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.1.1 (SC 211: 22–24), and either right before or shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, which is thought to be referenced in Mark 13. Adela Yarbro Collins (2007, 11–14) prefers shortly before, since the “desolating sacrilege” of 13:14 seems still to belong to the future, but Stephen S. Kimondo (2018, 49–54) suggests that it refers to Titus’s personal inspection of the sanctuary (Josephus, *J.W.* 6.7/260 (LCL 210: 252)) and that the vineyard parable in Mark 12:1–12 is formulated after 70 CE, when it was fulfilled by the Romans taking over the administration of Judea from the Sanhedrin. In contrast, James G. Crossley (2004, 141–58, 183–209) contends that the intra-Jewish perspective of Mark 7:1–23 necessitates that Mark must be written before 45 CE, when controversies about Christians not following Jewish dietary laws arose, as attested in Gal 2:11–14.
- 6 The parallel between Mark 1:33, where a large crowd gathers by Peter’s door, and 2:2, where the area by the door can no longer accommodate the growing audience, strongly suggests that the *oikos* (“house”) in Capernaum mentioned in 2:2 and 9:33 is Peter’s home (Painter 1999, 499, 502; Asumang 2009, 12).

He let no one follow him except Peter, James, and John, James's brother, and they went to the house of the synagogue leader, where ... he sent everyone out, brought the father of the child, the mother, and those accompanying him, and went in to where the child was. He took the child's hand and said: "*Talitha koum*," which means "Little girl, I say to you: Get up!" And at once the girl got up and walked around – she was twelve years old – and they were exceedingly amazed. (Mark 5:37–38, 40–42)<sup>7</sup>

Jesus's way of addressing the girl in Aramaic would be completely transparent to the five Aramaic-speaking witnesses in the story, but incomprehensible for Mark's Greek-speaking audience. By translating it, the author clarifies that it is an instruction in plain language and not a magic formula (Hooker 1991, 150; Boring 2006, 162; Collins 2007, 285–86). The use of Aramaic also indicates that the story originally circulated in this language, and thus reflects one of the earliest attainable memories of Jesus (Meier 1994, 777–88; Dunn 2003, 683; Tan 2016, 71–72).

In Mark's narrative, Peter is also present when Jesus heals a leper (Mark 1:40–45), restores a withered hand (3:1–6), stills a storm (4:35–41), drives out a legion of demons (5:1–20), heals a bleeding woman (5:26–34), feeds five thousand (6:32–44), walks on water (6:45–52), heals the people of Gennesaret (6:53–56), liberates a girl from a demon (7:24–30), gives a deaf man speech and hearing (7:31–37), feeds four thousand (8:1–9), heals a blind man (8:22–26), cures an epileptic boy (9:14–29), and

gives a blind beggar sight (10:46–52). Peter is also the one pointing out that a fig tree cursed by Jesus has miraculously withered overnight (11:12–14, 20–25).<sup>8</sup> Although Peter is included among the twelve who collectively heal and exorcize (Mark 6:13; cf. Henderson 2006, 243), he is never named as a performer of miracles, only as an observer.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear that Mark's primary concern is his portrait of Jesus. Although his miracle stories are not devoid of entertainment value (cf. esp. Mark 5:11–13; 8:24), they are primarily there to establish the protagonist as a powerful exorcist and healer, one who can even revive the dead and tame the forces of nature (Hooker 1991, 71–75; Achtemeier 2008, 1–10; Bond 2020, 135–38). Peter's presence is useful for the portrayal of Jesus as an attractive and authoritative teacher (Bond 2020, 190–95, 200–02), but since a disciple was expected to imitate everything his teacher did, it also creates an expectation that Peter will eventually perform miracles of his own (Capes 2003, 3–10; Copan 2007). His failure to do so within Mark's story leaves a tension between expectation and narration, but serves the author's interest in portraying Jesus's disciples negatively – a perfectly reasonable trade-off for a Graeco-Roman biographer (Bond 2020, 190–95).

8 It is always precarious to discuss the historical accuracy of miracle stories (cf. Collins 1992: 41–46; Achtemeier 2008: 136–40), but we may safely conclude that Mark preserves a historical memory of Jesus as an exorcist and a healer (Meier 1994: 630–31; Dunn 2003: 670).

9 Notably absent is also any mention of Peter as a witness to the resurrection, a tradition that clearly predates Mark's Gospel, since Paul cites it as something he has received (1 Cor 15:5) and identifies Peter as a leader of a movement built on the resurrection (Gal 1:1, 2:1–14).

7 Translations from ancient languages are my own.

Mark's habit of naming Peter as an observer of miracles, but never as the performer, is retained in the Gospels of Luke and John.<sup>10</sup> Luke adapts Mark's miracle stories partly to balance Jesus's teaching and miraculous activities, partly to present the wonders as grounds to trust and follow Jesus (Achtemeier 2008, 15–28, 160–61). He names Peter as a passive witness to the healing of the bleeding woman, the resurrection of the girl, the transfiguration, and the empty tomb (Luke 8:40–56; 9:28–36; 24:12), and although Peter is active in hauling in the abundant catch of fish, it is clear that the miracle is performed by Jesus (Luke 5:4–11). Peter is included among the twelve who are given power over demons and illnesses in Luke 9:1, but it is not clear from Luke 9:2, 6 whether he personally performs any healings or exorcisms. In John, Peter is named as present when Jesus feeds five thousand people and walks on water (John 6:1–21), and as a witness to the empty tomb and a post-resurrection appearance (John 20:6–7; 21:1–23), but he does not perform any miracles of his own. Like Mark, the Lukan and Johannine authors seem focused on their portraits of Jesus, as expected of any ancient biographer.

### Peter the apprentice

When Matthew reworks the Markan tradition,<sup>11</sup> he cuts unnecessary details, renders

10 Both Luke and John are likely to postdate Mark. The standard dating of Luke's literary activity is to the 80s or early 90s CE (Bovon 2002, 1.9), but suggestions vary from the early 60s CE (Seccombe 2020) to the early second century (Pervo 2009, 5). John is commonly dated to the 90s CE (Carson 1991, 82–86), although any date in the second half of the first century would in principle be possible (Michaels 2010, 38).

11 Matthew includes 90 per cent of Mark's material and is much more likely to have

the disciples less incompetent and emphasizes the themes of Christology, faith and discipleship in Mark's miracle stories (Held 1960, 155–8). When Jesus walks on water (Matt 14:22–33), the Matthean disciples no longer remain ignorant (Mark 6:51b–52), but understand that Jesus is the Son of God and fall down to worship him (Matt 14:33). Matthew also inserts a new scene where Peter overcomes his fear and seeks to join Jesus on the water (Held 1960, 193–95, 259–60; Maier 2015, 808):

Peter answered him: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said: "Come," and Peter stepped out of the boat, walked on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he was scared, started to sink, and cried out: "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand, caught him, and said to him: "Little-truster! Why did you doubt?" (Matt 14:28–31)

This insertion could possibly be taken from a pre-existing tradition unknown to or ignored by Mark,<sup>12</sup> but most scholars take it to be Matthew's own innovation (Davies and Allison 1991, 497; Gundry 1994, 300).<sup>13</sup> We recognize the author's

used the less-polished Mark than vice versa. Matthew is most often dated between 70 and 95 CE, in order to postdate Mark and be used by 2 Pet 1:17 and Pol. *Phil.* 2.3; 7.2 (LCL 24: 334–36, 342) in the early second century. Ulrich Luz (2007, 58–9) prefers shortly after 80 CE, Richard T. France (2007, 19) shortly before 70 CE, Gerhard Maier (2015, 20) 55–65 CE.

12 Since the Lukan Jesus does not walk on water, Matthew has no known source beyond Mark here.

13 *Pace* Maier (2015, 802–03, 812–13), who avows that the historicity of Matt 14:22–33 can only be denied for dogmatic reasons.



Peter and Jesus on the water. Illumination from the Daniel of Uranc Gospel, 1433 Armenian manuscript.

focus on faith and discipleship, as well as his typical complaint that the disciples trust too little (Matt 14:31; cf. 8:26; 16:8; 17:20), which he uses to replace Markan depictions of the twelve as lacking faith altogether (Held 1960, 194, 254–60, 278–87).

In the Matthean context, the evangelist has recently concluded the third of Jesus's five major speeches (France 2007, 8–10), in which he describes the kingdom of heaven (Matt 13:1–53), and subsequently takes up the theme of Jesus's identity. The inhabitants of Nazareth have discussed who Jesus is (13:54–58), Herod the tetrarch has declared that he is a resurrected John the Baptist (14:1–2) and Jesus has fed the five thousand (14:13–21). After the walking on the water, the theme continues with

Peter's identification of Jesus as the Christ (16:13–20), two passion predictions (16:21; 17:22–23) and the transfiguration (17:1–8). In all, this segment of Matthew's narrative serves to deepen the disciples' understanding of who Jesus is, while the people at large remain with limited understanding (Luz 2001, 299–300).

The feeding, walking on the water and transfiguration have two important differences from the typical Matthean miracle story. First, they occur on the initiative of Jesus rather than of a supplicant. Most healings and exorcisms take place at the request of the ill or their friends and relatives (cf. Matt 4:24; 8:2, 28; 9:18, 20, 27, 32), and the storm is stilled on the initiative of the disciples (8:25). In contrast, Jesus himself

turns the disciples' reasonable suggestion to let the audience go into an opportunity for a miracle (14:15–21), it is Jesus's idea to climb the mountain where the transfiguration occurs (17:1) and Jesus walks on the water of his own accord. Secondly, these miracles are less problem-oriented and more demonstrative than most Matthean miracles. Plot-wise, it would have been perfectly acceptable to let the listeners go to find food themselves, to stay at the foot of the mountain and to seek other means of transportation across the Sea of Galilee. These wonders are probably included in Matthew's narrative to demonstrate that Jesus is an abundant provider of life's necessities, a master of the physical elements and something beyond merely a human being.<sup>14</sup>

Given Matthew's dependence on Mark, Peter is expected to witness these demonstrative miracles, but walking on the water himself is something else. Since a disciple should imitate everything his master does, Peter behaves in an exemplary fashion when he challenges Jesus to ask him out on the water (Gundry 1994, 299; Luz 2001, 320). Jesus's ability to extend the miracle to his senior disciple also supports Matthew's characterization of him as divine, and Peter's immediate cry for help when he fails can be seen as exemplary to Matthew's readers (Davies and Allison 1991, 507, 510; Luz 2001, 321–22; Case-Winters 2015, 196). The typical Matthean complaint that Peter trusts too little suggests that more can be done if his trust grows (Held 1960, 195, 276–78; Maier 2015, 808–09).

14 This purpose is also served by Jesus's declaration *egō eimi* ("It is I") in Matt 14:27, just before the text quoted above, which references God's self-presentation at the burning bush in Exod 3:14 (Luz 2001, 320). Cf. also France (2007, 566–67).

Matthew's addition is thus a first step in expanding on Mark's version of Peter, allowing the character to develop from an observer of miracles to a performer. It closes Mark's gap between expectation and narration and suggests a biographical interest that is not limited to Jesus, but includes his most senior disciple.

### Peter the performer

In Acts, Luke greatly expands Peter's role as an active wonder-worker. When the Spirit falls on the day of Pentecost, Peter and the other apostles start speaking foreign languages, to the great astonishment of many pilgrims. Peter steps forward as their spokesperson, and thousands of people join the new movement (Acts 2:1–41).<sup>15</sup> When approaching the temple for the afternoon prayer, Peter and John encounter a paralytic beggar. Peter drags him up by the right hand and instructs him to walk – and the man immediately jumps up, walks, leaps and praises God. Peter insists that the miracle was made in Jesus's name,<sup>16</sup> the people are astounded, and many come to trust Jesus (Acts 3:1–16; 4:4). In Lydda, Peter heals another paralytic, who has been bedridden for eight years, and the whole town comes to believe (Acts 9:32–35).<sup>17</sup>

These instances establish Peter's miraculous powers as effective tools of evangelization within Luke's narrative world. Just like Jesus's numerous miracles, Peter's

15 Peter's acquisition of the Spirit serves to narratively explain his newfound boldness and wonder-working abilities (Myllykoski 2006, 161–62).

16 Luke's insistence on the power of Jesus's name indicates that Jesus in Luke's time was known as a healer (Dunn 2009, 670).

17 The episode seems influenced by Jesus's healing of a paralytic in Peter's house in Mark 2:1–12 (Conzelmann 1987, 76; Pervo 2009, 253).



Peter raising Tabitha. Detail from a window in Ely Cathedral.

deeds attract attention, demonstrate that he is a divine agent and lead to mass conversions in both Jerusalem and Lydda (Achteimeier 2008, 160, cf. 216). The healing at the temple leads also to persecution, as Peter and John are jailed overnight and interrogated by the Jewish rulers (Acts 4:1–22; Myllykoski 2006, 161–62; Pervo 2009, 96). In addition, Peter receives a vision telling him not to regard non-Jews as unclean (10:9–16, 34–35), is broken out of prison by an angel (5:17–29; 12:1–11), has his mere shadow recognized for its healing powers (5:15–16) and dramatically announces the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The latter is likely to be prophetic proclama-

Myllykoski (2006, 159–60, 178) finds miracles and divine interventions to be vitally important to Luke’s plot construction and imaginative storytelling.

The Lukan Peter’s most impressive feat is performed when he is called to attend the wake after the death of Tabitha, a highly respected Christian disciple whose body has been washed and placed in an upstairs room for viewing (Acts 9:36–39):

Peter sent everyone out, prayed on his knees, turned to the body and said: “Tabitha, get up!” She opened her

tions of judgement rather than miraculous executions (Conzelmann 1987, 37–38; cf. Pervo 2009, 134).



eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. He gave her his hand, raised her up, called for the saints and widows, and presented her alive. This became known in all of Joppa, and many came to believe in the Lord. (Acts 9:40–42)

This scene is highly reminiscent of when Jesus resurrects the daughter of the synagogue leader in Mark 5 (Conzelmann 1987, 77; Pervo 2009, 254). Just as he has learned from his master, Peter sends out the mourners, addresses the dead body and tells the woman to get up. Even his use of the woman's Aramaic name "Tabitha" resembles Jesus's way of addressing the little girl as *Talitha*.<sup>19</sup> With this raising of a dead woman, Peter has graduated as an accomplished performer of miracles comparable to those of Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

To the extent that Luke has based his miracle stories on what he deems to be trustworthy accounts, he has produced historiographically oriented biographical material about Peter. If he has made everything up, he has written biographic fiction. The prevalence of miracles in Acts' Peter cycle suggests that Luke may also be guided by an interest in wonders that also fulfils the criteria for paradoxography.

19 This Aramaic address is not preserved in Luke 8:54, but readers of Acts may be familiar with the Markan parallel.

20 Pervo (2009, 254) remarks that the story would be at home in the Apocryphal Acts.

## Peter the master wonder-worker

In the fourth-century Latin *Acts of Peter*,<sup>21</sup> Peter is further developed into a master wonder-worker who battles successfully with Simon, the magician from Acts 8:9–22, who is used to personify evil and heresy in many early Christian traditions (Bockmuehl 2010, 101–13). Simon's arrival in Rome quickly reduces the Roman Christian community to seven people, six of whom are too old and frail to even leave their homes (*Acts Pet.* 4.1–18), and prompts Christ to appear to Peter in a vision to apprise him of the situation and call him to Rome (5.1–6).<sup>22</sup>

Peter presents himself to the Romans as a witness to Jesus's miracles – specifically mentioning the transfiguration (20.13–17) and the walking on water (9.2–6; 10.13) – but also proves able to perform miracles of his own. When Simon refuses to see him (*Acts Pet.* 9.2–6), Peter grants a nearby dog the faculty of speech and sends him to speak to Simon:

Peter looked around and noticed a big dog, bound with a large chain, approached it, and untied it. Once released, the dog was given a human voice and said to Peter: "What do you

21 The Latin text of the *Actus Vercellenses* can be securely dated to the fourth century. Most scholars presume it to be a faithful translation of a second-century Greek original (Bockmuehl 2010, 199–201; Stoops 2012, 1–26; Döhler 2018, 3–10; Bremmer 2023, 88–89), but Matthew C. Baldwin (2005, 194–301) argues convincingly that it should be regarded as a new composition using the older Greek text as a source. I use the edition by Marietheres Döhler (2018) and the verse numbering in Robert F. Stoops's English translation (2012).

22 Much as in Acts 10:1–16; 11:28; 16:6–7, the numerous visions in *Acts Pet.* bring the plot forward by telling the characters what to do next (Misset-van de Weg 1998, 101–2).

command me to do, servant of the indescribable living God?” Peter said to him: “Go inside and tell Simon in the middle of his assembly: ‘Peter tells you: Show yourself in public, for you are the reason I came to Rome, you shameless deceiver of simple souls!’” The dog ran inside, forced its way into the middle of those who were with Simon, raised its front paws, and screamed at the top of its voice: “Simon! To you Peter, the servant of Christ who is standing at the door, says: ‘Show yourself in public, for because of you I have come to Rome, you most shameless seducer of simple souls!’” When Simon heard this and considered this incredible sight, he was at a loss for words by which to deceive those around him, and everyone was astounded. (*Acts Pet.* 9.9–15; Döhler 2018, 80.279–81.288)

This scene represents the first confrontation between Peter and his antagonist. By depicting how Simon tries to hide in his rooms to avoid the protagonist, who calls on miraculous assistance from a mere animal, the conflict is set up as an uneven fight between the cowardly and deceitful Simon and the upright and idealized Peter.

This contrast is further emphasized when a demon-possessed onlooker informs Peter that Simon is trying in vain to get the dog to lie and tell Peter that Simon was unavailable (11.1–7). When Peter exorcizes the demon, it kicks down a marble statue of the emperor, and the house-owner Marcellus is terrified that he will be punished for dishonouring Caesar’s image.<sup>23</sup>

23 The author may be inspired by the historical senator Granius Marcellus, who in 15 CE was brought to court for replacing the head of a statue of Caesar Augustus (28 BCE–14

Peter tells him to sprinkle water over the marble pieces, and the statue is miraculously repaired (11.8–20).<sup>24</sup> The audience demands more, and Peter complies by making a dried herring swim in a bucket of water (12.15–13.10), and by letting a seven-month-old baby take on a grown man’s voice to scold Simon and challenge him to a duel on the Julian forum (15.9–14).<sup>25</sup> These ostentatious miracles do not solve any otherwise insurmountable issues in the plot, but serve to ridicule Simon, establish Peter’s miraculous power and status as a divine agent, and attract people to his movement (Misset-van de Weg 1998, 99, 107; Achtemeier 2008, 187, 191). Their demonstrative character is reminiscent of Jesus’s feeding of the thousands, walking on the water and transfiguration.

In their final confrontation, Simon and Peter are both challenged, in the presence of the city prefect and a large crowd of paying spectators, to revive three dead people, concluding with the recently expired senator Nicostratus, who is brought into the forum on a bier.<sup>26</sup> Peter exhorts the crowd

CE) with the likeness of Tiberius (14–37 CE); cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.75 (LCL 248:368–70; Döhler 2018, 224; Bremmer 2023, 94–5).

24 Misset-van der Weg (1998, 106) claims that Marcellus performs the miracle, but his role is no larger than Peter’s in lowering the nets when Jesus lets him catch an abundance of fish (Luke 5:4–6; John 21:6; cf. Achtemeier 2008, 186).

25 Apart from the main plot, Peter also miraculously locates stolen goods (*Acts Pet.* 17.8), prophesies about Simon’s end (18.4), gives several blind widows their sight (20.1–4; 21.1–15) and heals every ailing person brought to him (29.1; 31.1–3).

26 Before this final revival, Peter also resuscitates a young slave from the prefect’s household and revives the only son of a poor widow (*Acts Pet.* 26–27). Cf. Elijah in 1 Kgs 17:17–24; 1 Kgs 18:16–39 (Berglund forthcoming).



The fall of Simon Magus. Painting by Paul Troger 1743, now at Österreichische Galerie Belvedere.

to trust whichever of the combatants is able to revive the senator as a divine messenger, and Simon persuades them to burn the loser alive. When Simon is able to make the dead body move, open its eyes, and bow, the crowd are eager to gather firewood for Peter's bonfire (28.1–34).

Faced with mortal danger, Peter demands that Simon step back from the bier, and when the prefect pushes the magician away from the corpse, it promptly falls back into immobility. The crowd realize that they have been fooled and demand Simon be burned alive, but Peter calms them down and eventually gets everyone to agree that Simon should be spared, the

slaves freed at the senator's death should remain free,<sup>27</sup> and the funds reserved to honour him should be distributed among the poor (28.35–62). Only then does he proceed with the resurrection:

Peter, truly rejoicing in his soul, said in the Spirit: "Lord, you who are merciful, Jesus Christ, make yourself known to your Peter who entreats you, just as compassionately and benignly as you always have done. Before all these who have obtained their freedom in order to serve, may Nicostratus be risen." And, touching the young man, Peter said: "Get up!" The young man arose, cast off his winding sheet, sat up, untied his chin, and asked for some other clothes. When he got down from the bier, he said to Peter: "I implore you, sir, let us go to our Lord Christ. I saw him speaking with you, and he pointed me out to you and told you: 'Bring him to me, for he is mine.'" (*Acts Pet.* 28.63–68; Döhler 2018, 122.759–124.766)

This scene constitutes Peter's decisive victory over Simon, who is henceforth unable to obtain any respect among the Romans.<sup>28</sup> Not only has Peter outdone him

27 *Acts Pet.* 28.17 (Döhler 2018, 118.709–10) specifies that the slaves were to put caps (*pilea*) on their heads and march in front of the bier to the forum, a practice that reflects the common Roman practice of freeing slaves at their owner's death (Bremmer 2017, 144). Resurrecting the senator would put their newly acquired freedom into question.

28 Obstinate unwilling to accept his defeat, Simon unsuccessfully keeps attempting to impress the Romans with his tricks (*Acts Pet.* 31.4–10). His last attempt to outdo Peter by ascending into the sky ends with him falling and breaking his leg

in the game of impressive magic tricks – when the stakes are upped to resurrecting undoubtedly dead people,<sup>29</sup> Peter’s revival of the senator publicly exposes Simon as the fraud he always was (Misset-van de Weg 1998, 97). As if that is not enough, the revived senator himself reports having seen Jesus in the afterlife, and can certify that Peter is in his service.

In the extended character development of Simon Peter, the revivification in itself has little to add to the characterization of an apostle who has already demonstrated his capacity to resurrect the dead in the case of Tabitha (Acts 9:36–42). But the ease with which Peter revives a man whose funeral was already under way, and the confidence with which he bargains with the Romans before performing the miracle, further establish him as an accomplished and experienced miracle-worker. Taken together with his abilities to make dogs and babies speak and dried herrings swim, his ability to revive the dead indicates that there is no limit to his miraculous capacity. These successive expansions on the Markan Peter represent a considerable character development, where the faltering fisherman who lost his faith and betrayed Christ is now portrayed as a mighty man of wonders (Misset-van de Weg 1998, 110). As the story is completely driven by the wonders performed by Peter and Simon, the historical interest recedes in favour of speculative fiction based on paradoxographical interests.

(31.11–32.13), whereafter he is carried off to die (32.19–21). For a comparison of the Latin and Greek texts of this segment, see Baldwin (2005, 261–68).

- 29 Peter’s first resuscitation is of a slave boy who collapsed at a word from Simon, leaving some doubt as to whether he was truly dead (*Acts Pet.* 26.6–9; cf. 25.1–5), but the latter two men died naturally, and were brought in by their grieving mothers (25.6; 25.16; 28.20–21).

## Conclusion

This article has traced the development of the literary character of Simon Peter from Mark, through Matthew and Acts, to the fourth-century Latin *Acts of Peter*. We have found that while the Markan Peter is a mere observer of miracles performed by Jesus, the Matthean Peter seeks to walk on the water himself, and the Peter of Acts establishes himself as an accomplished miracle-worker by receiving visions, healing the paralysed, and resurrecting a dead woman. In the *Acts of Peter*, the character’s miraculous abilities seem limitless, as he makes dogs and infants speak, resurrects a dried herring and restores a shattered marble statue. In sharp contrast to Acts 9:40–42, where he sends everyone out, he is now so confident in his ability to resurrect the dead that he calmly bargains with the crowd before performing the miracle.

Within this narrative development, we may recognize how the authors’ use of miracles evolves. In Mark, Peter’s role is largely limited to supporting the author’s biographical aim of establishing Jesus as a powerful divine agent, and his role as observer of Jesus’s miracles reflects that. In Matthew, Peter’s desire to imitate Jesus in his ability to walk on water is still subservient to the portrait of Jesus, where the emphasis is on his ability to extend his power over nature to his senior disciple, but also suggests an interest in portraying Peter as a second Christian wonder-worker. This establishing function of miracles is in full play in Acts, where Peter closely matches Jesus by healing two paralytics, having his mere shadow recognized for its healing capacity, and resurrecting a dead woman. It is still active, albeit to a lesser extent, in the *Acts of Peter*, where his power and authority are never seriously in doubt.

Miracles may also drive the plot by presenting the protagonist with problems

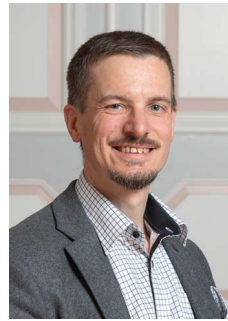
to solve in a miraculous way. On the episode level this is true in almost every healing account, as the protagonist encounters and helps an ailing person. But while miracles play a supportive role in the overarching plots of the Gospels and Acts, *vis-à-vis* the central aim of preaching the Christian gospel, the roles are reversed in the *Acts of Peter*, where the central plot is a battle of miracles, and the spread of Christianity merely serves as a confirmation of Peter's victory.

Furthermore, miracles may have value as entertainment, when they place characters in comic situations or present the antagonist as ridiculously outmatched by the protagonist. This function may be present when Jesus sends a legion of demons into a herd of pigs (Mark 5:11–13) or half-heals a blind man so that humans look like walking trees to him (Mark 8:24), but Peter's miracles in Acts are more serious in nature. In contrast, innovative miracle stories have a decidedly comic effect in the *Acts of Peter*, where they repeatedly ridicule Peter's antagonist.

The first function of miracles fits well with the genre of ancient biographies, where the protagonist is to be presented as an admirable individual worth imitating. Their continued use in later stories suggests that Acts is a predominantly biographical narrative, and that even the *Acts of Peter* participates in the biographical genre to some extent. The second function works well within fictional biographies, where historical accuracy can be left to one side in favour of a good story, and its growth within this narrative tradition corresponds to the growth of fiction in later apostle stories. The third function may have a limited place in any story, but when the miracles seem mainly selected for their exotic nature and entertainment value, there is an overlap with paradoxographical

collections, and such a story can be said to participate in the genre of paradoxography.

We may thus conclude that the miracles in the Gospels and canonical Acts are mostly aimed at establishing their main character as a trustworthy divine agent, while the *Acts of Peter* are more interested in miracles for their plot contributions and entertainment value. In a nutshell, the Petrine narrative tradition grows less biographical and more paradoxographical over time. ■



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