

# **Constructing Protestant and Catholic Peters: A comparative study in the literary use of the New Testament and ecclesiastical tradition**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Constructing Protestant and Catholic Peters: A comparative study in the literary use of the New Testament and ecclesiastical tradition**

*Just as literary authors have long taken liberties with the biblical accounts of Jesus Christ and shaped Him to fit their own agendas, they have also appropriated considerable artistic licence in enhancing the meagre information about Peter in the New Testament when constructing fictional narratives about him. A comparison of *The Big Fisherman* by the theologically liberal American Congregationalist Lloyd C Douglas and *Simon Peter the Fisherman* by the Austrian Catholic Kurt Frieberger illustrates how two accomplished novelists, drawing in part on similar sources, created markedly different and to some extent predictable images of this apostle. Neither novel is fully faithful to the New Testament evidence; both evince the influence of extrabiblical sources.*

The immense international success of the film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) is a vivid reminder that for many decades cinematography and modern literature have been the media through which large numbers of people in one culture after another have been informed about the origins of Christianity. Fictional constructions of Jesus have been numerous and highly diverse. As Theodore Ziolkowski and others have demonstrated, literary authors as well as writers of non-fiction in various genres have tended to recreate Jesus in their own image, namely shaping Him to provide support for *inter alia* their interpretation of Christianity, their political cause, and their notions of social reform (Ziolkowski 1972).

Much less well explored in scholarly literature, however, have been the numerous manifestations of Peter in literary dress, especially those tailored during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Undoubtedly owing in large measure to both his prominence in the New Testament as a dynamic though volatile and otherwise flawed disciple and the Roman Catholic belief that this

erstwhile fisherman became the first pope, literary artists in one country after another representing a broad spectrum of denominational traditions have found in him a fascinating subject to be explored. Among the examples by prominent writers are *Quo Vadis?* (1895) by the subsequent Nobel laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz and *Now the Servant's Name Was Malchus* (1928) by the Pulitzer Prize recipient Thornton Wilder.

However rich the tradition surrounding Peter has become in the history of Christianity, the information about him in the four canonical gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and a few of the New Testament epistles is relatively scant. Biblical scholars have repeatedly underscored this. Nevertheless, Peter has remained a topic of reinterpretation in scholarship among North American, European, and other theologians representing Catholic, Protestant, and other Christian denominational traditions (Cullmann 1962; Brown et al 1973; Berglar 1991; Thiede 1986; Dschulnigg 1996; Perkins 2000; Wiarda 2000).

Owing to the limits of what can be known about Peter from canonical Scripture, in crafting lengthy narratives about him, especially historical novels, modern writers have been compelled to draw on other sources, not the least of which has been their own imaginations. Their creativity has been influenced by factors not unlike those which have shaped fictional constructions of Jesus. However, other tropes, such as the prominence of Peter in the Catholic tradition, have also played their part in determining how this ostensible prince of the apostles has been portrayed.

In the present article it is my intention to illustrate this crucial fact by comparing two novels, namely *The Big Fisherman* (1948) by the theologically liberal American Congregationalist Lloyd C. Douglas and *Simon Peter the Fisherman* (1955, though originally published in 1953 under the title *Der Fischer Simon Petrus*) by the Viennese Roman Catholic Kurt Frieberger. It will be demonstrated that both authors imbued their texts with *addenda* to the New Testament source material which reflected their respective theological-ecclesiastical stances and that the resulting portrayals of Peter are remarkably, if to a great degree predictably, different from each other.

## 1 LLOYD C DOUGLAS: MINISTER, APOLOGIST AND NOVELIST

Douglas (1877-1951) was nearing the end of his relatively long career as a *littérateur* when he penned *The Big Fisherman*<sup>1</sup>. Born in Indiana as the son of a Lutheran pastor, he followed in his father's footsteps and by the age of thirty-two occupied the pulpit of the prominent Luther Place Memorial Church in Washington, D C. Yet the theological modernism which was proliferating in American Protestantism at that time left its mark on Douglas, who in 1911 abruptly resigned his pastorate and demitted the Lutheran ministry. As his daughters recalled in their biography of him, "He didn't believe what he was saying, and he didn't know what he believed" (Dawson and Wilson 1953:59). Eventually he found a theologically amenable home in the more latitudinarian Congregational church and as a minister in that denomination served congregations in Ann Arbor, Akron, Los Angeles, and Montreal before leaving the pastoral ministry entirely in 1933 to devote his time almost exclusively to writing. By then he had published several fictional as well as non-fictional books.

In the meantime, Douglas had become obliquely involved in the extensively publicised debate of the 1920s between modernists and so-called "fundamentalists" in various American Protestant denominations. One of his contributions to the strife was clearly intended to provide an escape for Christians who wished to retain their faith while accommodating modern science. Titled *Those Disturbing Miracles*, it offered explanations of the numerous occurrences in the Bible, especially healings and other miracles wrought by Jesus. Douglas sought to amalgamate older, rationalistic clarifications with more recent ones incorporating psychology (Douglas 1927).

After writing during the 1930s a series of popular novels set in modern-day America, Douglas gained international renown with his bestseller of 1942, *The Robe*. Translated into many languages and filmed in 1953, this biblical novel focused on a Roman soldier who

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1 No comprehensive scholarly study of Douglas and his publications has ever been published. His autobiography, *Time to Remember* (Douglas 1951) covers only the first few decades of his life. It was supplemented by his two daughters' account; see Dawson and Wilson 1953).

attended the crucifixion of Jesus and came into possession of the garment Jesus had worn. Eventually both he and his female companion become Christian martyrs. The treatment of miraculous phenomena in the plot suggests that during the Second World War Douglas had moved theologically far from his earlier rationalistic dismissal of miracles and concomitant confidence in human rationality (Bode 1950:340-352; Hale 2007:310-329).

## **2 THE BIG FISHERMAN AS PROBLEMATIC BIBLICAL FICTION**

*The Big Fisherman* is on one level the story of Simon Peter, the rock on whom Jesus announced he would build his church. There is, to be sure, much about this eminent disciple. However, what becomes increasingly apparent when one reads *The Big Fisherman* is that Douglas, as a former minister of the Gospel who initially used fiction as a complementary means of communicating Christian verities, was primarily motivated by a desire to retell the story of Jesus and provide a lively fictional framework for conveying his ministry and teachings. Douglas used the dynamic figure of Peter as a foil to highlight “the Master”. Despite its title, this is to a great degree a Christocentric novel.

The plot is considerably more complex than a mere bifocal one featuring Peter and Jesus. As he had done in *The Robe* and some of his novels set in the twentieth century, Douglas included a romantic tale apparently intended to capture readers’ interest and add contours to the storyline. This extends the familiar nuclear account of Jesus and Peter well beyond Galilee and Judea and incorporates an Arabian dimension. In brief, according to Douglas’s rewriting on history, Herod the Great and King Aretas of Arabia agree to bury the hatchet of centuries-old hatred between their respective peoples and form a defensive alliance against the Roman Empire. To cement the coalition, a marriage between one of Herod’s sons, Antipas, and Aretas’ daughter Arnon is arranged. She lives unhappily in Jerusalem and gives birth to their daughter, called both “Fara” and “Esther” while her vain and indolent husband, now the tetrarch of Galilee, supervises the construction of his palace at Tiberias. Their marriage is dissolved when it becomes apparent that the Roman plan to devastate both Judea and Arabia will not be implemented. In an incalculable and never forgotten affront to the Arabs, Arnon and her infant daughter are returned to Arabia in disgrace. After Fara learns the identity of her father, she vows to carry out a local promise to

avenge her mother's, and her nation's embarrassment by murdering Antipas. This teenaged girl's quest for his blood leads Fara, disguised as a young man, to Galilee, where she first encounters John the Baptist, then Jesus and Peter, and eventually becomes a follower of Jesus. In the meantime, her gifted Arabian boyfriend, Voldi, sets out to rescue her, and he, too, comes into contact with several central figures of the messianic movement which gives birth to Christianity. Eventually Fara and Voldi find each other.

Douglas created in his cast of characters a certain informality which presumably brought many of his readers into a more intimate relationship with many events of the New Testament than they could get from reading it alone. The names of several of the disciples are given in familiar or diminutive forms. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, for instance, become "Jimmie" (Douglas 1948:302) and "Johnny" (Douglas 1948:99), while Thaddeus is predictably "Thad" (Douglas 1948:345) and Philip "Phil" (Douglas 1948:315). Joseph of Arimathea is reduced to "Joe" (Douglas 1948:387), and Rebecca becomes "Becky" (Douglas 1948:335). Peter, however, escapes being dubbed "Pete".

Aesthetically, *The Big Fisherman* is hardly on a par with *The Robe*. To begin with, disproportionate attention is paid to the interwoven account of Fara, Voldi, and the other Arabs, and this repeatedly detracts from the message which Douglas seeks to highlight. Indeed, *The Big Fisherman* begins in Arabia and traces the first few episodes of the contrived plot through the desert before its contorted road belatedly leads Fara to John the Baptist, Simon, and – finally – Jesus of Nazareth. One reads fully 91 pages before reaching, in Chapter V, the material dealing directly with any of the characters who become Jesus' first disciples. Even after Galilee becomes the principal venue, Douglas shifts the narrative spotlight again and again to Arabia and from Peter and Jesus to Fara, Voldi, and their compatriots. The reader is left wondering whether this novel should have been titled *The Handsome Horseman* rather than *The Big Fisherman*.

The problem is exacerbated by the sensationalism and implausibility of the Arabic dimensions of the plot. Douglas strings one *deus ex machina* after another to bring his Gentile characters into contact with Jesus and his disciples, Roman officials, and other characters who are central to the enhanced biblical narrative. In the process, linguistic and other cultural barriers fall like palm leaves on

the floor of the desert. Because the plot requires it, Fara becomes fluent in Greek and, *mirabile dictu*, in short order imparts enough of that language to Peter so that he can converse fairly well in it. Meanwhile, her sword-swinging paramour Voldi swashbuckles through dastardly highwaymen with his sword to save the life of his Roman companion whom they have beset.

Other difficulties also abound. For all his efforts to make biblical history come alive, Douglas disappoints with his faulty research and consequent misstatements of historical phenomena. A few examples will illustrate this weakness. At the beginning of the narrative, the chronological framework simply makes no sense. Herod the Great, who according to most sources lived from ca 73 BCE until 4 BCE, is still alive after Tiberius has been recalled (in 2 B.C.) to Rome to aid the ageing Augustus Caesar. A few months after that well-documented event in Roman political history, Herod is said to be sixty years old (Douglas 1948:13-14), not a man who then would have then been over seventy had he not already died. Nor does Douglas's treatment of Herod's son Antipas inspire the confidence of informed readers. In historical sources, Antipas is said to have been born in 21 or 20 BCE. However, in *The Big Fisherman* he is twenty-five when his father arranges his marriage shortly after the recall of Tiberius to Rome in 2 BCE (Douglas 1948:20). Further eroding the plausibility of Douglas's account, Herod has made Antipas tetrarch of Galilee (Douglas 1948:21), but that title did not become his until after his father's death, when he became tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Douglas's Herod the Great dies only after his son has begun to govern Galilee and construct his capital at Tiberias (Douglas 1948:47). Rounding out the warped political history in *The Big Fisherman*, Pontius Pilate is appointed procurator of Judea and sent to Jerusalem shortly after the death of Herod the Great (Douglas 1948: 52). But the Pilate of history did not assume that position—with his headquarters in Caesarea—until 26 AD.

### **3 THE PORTRAYAL OF PETER IN THE BIG FISHERMAN**

Because the New Testament provides so few biographical details about Peter, Douglas was compelled to make extensive use of his imagination in order to paint more than a skeletal portrait of him. In some respects, the result is a credible one which harmonises with the biblical evidence. Peter is a nonconformist type, a man who shuns the synagogue where his pious but apparently entirely a-political

father Jonas worships regularly. Indeed, “From early boyhood the sacrilegious and belligerent Simon had been a growing affliction to his parents” (Douglas 1948:92-93). A “gigantic, hairy, deeply tanned Galileen”, Peter, thirty-five years of age when he enters the narrative as an ambitious fisherman on the Sea of Gennesaret, is a widower, having lost his wife “Abigail”, after whom he names one of the boats in his small fleet. His mother-in-law, on whom Douglas bestows the name “Hannah”, resides in Bethsaida (Douglas 1948:95). He does not entirely lack religious beliefs; his attitude towards the divine parallels what in the eighteenth century would be called Deism. “I believe in the God of our fathers—who made the world—and gave us our life—and the sunshine, rain and harvests,” he tells a local Sadducee. But he also voices a brief *non credo*: “I do not believe that He takes any notice of our small things—or cares whether we roast calves and lambs in His honour” (Douglas 1948:98). Douglas elaborates in the following chapter. “He assumed that there must be a Great Mind in charge of the stars and the sky and other large undertakings, but he couldn’t believe that God ever stooped to such trivial engagements as wilfully breaking the windlass chain at the Abrams’ well because the old man had walked a little too far on the Sabbath,” explains the narrator. “Simon’s God was a neat and trusty housekeeper, who put the sun out in the morning and took it in at night with a regularity you could count on, and He arranged that the seasons should come along in a dependable procession” (Douglas 1948:134). There is no hint of this in the New Testament references to Peter; Douglas apparently placed a low ceiling on the future apostle’s pre-Christian religious convictions in order to accentuate the contrast between them and his sentiments after becoming a follower of Jesus. Indeed, at times Simon is categorically hostile. “All religion is rubbish!” he declares shortly before encountering Jesus (Douglas 1948:140).

Though “stridently irreligious” in his attitude towards Judaism, the early Peter has a “passionate love” of the Jewish nation. Concomitantly, “In his regard all nations except Israel were of one ignominious category”. For that matter, Peter has little time for Jews outside Galilee, especially urban-dwellers who do not work honestly with their hands (Douglas 1948:94). Yet for all his chauvinism, Douglas’s Peter does not really favour sedition; he seems content to complain about Roman rule but does not wish to risk his neck attempting to overthrow it (Douglas 1948: 118, 126-127, 159-160).

#### **4 PETER'S EVOLVING ATTITUDE TOWARDS JESUS**

Of pivotal thematic importance in *The Big Fisherman* is the evolution of Peter's attitude towards Jesus. Initially he refers to the Nazarene, about whom he has heard rumours, apparently following the wine-into-water miracle at Cana, as "this cracked Carpenter who has turned vintner" (Douglas 1948:100), and the willingness of many people, including some of his young employees, to follow the anti-materialist Jesus causes Simon headaches (Douglas 1948:133). Yet Simon's curiosity is piqued, and eventually he joins the crowd who witness Jesus heal a blind girl. This event is a turning point in his life: "He gasped involuntarily and stifled a sob. The incredible thing had happened! It was impossible—but it had actually happened!" (Douglas 1948:164).

The seed has thus been planted, but the relationship between the two men germinates gradually. Simon continues to toil as a fisherman and has lingering doubts about the miraculous healings and tells Voldi, who has come to Galilee in search of Fara: "Some claim to have seen miracles performed, others try to explain them, still others doubt them" (Douglas 1948:159). His doubts dwindle, however, after Jesus is a guest at his house (Douglas 1948:227), and in a conversation with his mother-in-law not long thereafter Simon relates how "he had been forced to abandon his prejudices and admit the miraculous power of the strange young man from Nazareth" (Douglas 1948:242). Notwithstanding the rationalistic explanations Douglas had given in the 1920s for the miracles of Jesus, nothing in *The Big Fisherman*, including the ethical teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, surpasses their power to sway Peter to discipleship. Given the enthusiasm with which he is described in approaching his tasks, neither his confession that Jesus is "the son of God" nor Jesus' declaration that he would "build my Kingdom" upon him (Douglas 1948:294) comes as a surprise. Equally unsurprising is the licence Douglas granted himself in paraphrasing Matthew 16 (where "Messiah" and "Church" [rather than "Kingdom"] are mentioned) in this regard. Henceforth called "Peter", he assumes greater responsibilities in Jesus' ministry: "It was almost as if he owned the show – and Jesus was his exhibit" (Douglas 1948:419).

The portrayal of Peter in Jerusalem adheres more closely to the biblical account and offers few surprises. Douglas loosely recounts the three-fold denial (Douglas 1948:371) and some of the post-resurrections of Jesus, including that in John 21:17 where Jesus had

told him, in Douglas's abbreviated words: "You are a shepherd now. Feed my sheep!" (Douglas 1948:396). In Jerusalem, moreover, Douglas bestows physical signs of ecclesiastical stature on Peter. There is a "softening and refinement of his face", and "his formerly unkempt black beard had been shortened; it too glistened with white". Finally, "Peter's face had lost its austerity and taken on dignity" (Douglas 1948:419). He evinces great self-confidence, especially when touched by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and professes publicly: "And from this day forward we are commissioned to spread the good news of His conquering Kingdom!" (Douglas 1948:421).

## 5 PETER IN ARABIA AND ROME

What may be particularly surprising is that after keeping Peter in Galilee and Judea for most of the saga, Douglas takes this formerly chauvinistic and bucolic but now Spirit-filled and spiritually maturing Jew twice outside those areas. These journeys are foreshadowed by a dream Peter has after the resurrection. An angel, or "mysterious visitor", says to him, "Peter—I have been sent to say that you have been entrusted with a very important mission. It will take you to far places and you will meet all manner of God's creatures." Indeed, the geographical compass of his apostolic ministry will be extremely broad: "The Master intends his Kingdom to serve the whole world. If it is not open to everybody, it is not open to anybody!" (Douglas 1948:428).

Peter's role in this is developed in stages, but it is never really completed. First, he becomes the leader of the church in Jerusalem but also spends time in Capernaum. Having learnt that Deran, the son of the Arabian king Zendi, is gravely ill, he decides to undertake a hazardous journey to the Arabian capital in the hope that by healing the young man he might foster more harmonious relations between the Arabs and the Jews. Subsequently – and this is crucial for the comparative aspects of the present study – Peter feels called to tend the flock of Christians in Rome and therefore decides to scrap his plans to evangelise in Greece. Instead of disembarking in Piraeus, he continues his voyage to Italy. In the last few chapters of *The Big Fisherman*, Peter ministers quietly and humbly to the persecuted believers there. He maintains a very low profile, indeed, a subterranean one, spending much of his time with fellow Christians in the catacombs engirdling the city. His status in the Roman church, however, never corresponds to his physical height, and he has little

to do with the civil authorities. Instead, Peter is described as going about his ministry, preaching the Gospel and comforting the distressed. When he proclaims that Jesus will emerge as the universal ruler and thereby render caesars and secular governments irrelevant, he brings the wrath of the civil authorities down on himself. Imprisoned, he cheerfully accepts martyrdom. Yet Peter cannot forget his denial of Jesus on the night before the crucifixion or fully overcome his guilt feelings stemming therefrom. Moreover, despite the rapid proliferation of the church in some regions, he dies without witnessing nearly the growth for which he has hoped. In a dream before his own execution, Peter hears Jesus saying sorrowfully while “grazing entreatingly into the far distance”: “You would not come unto me that you might have life!” (Douglas 1948:459). On that ambiguous note *The Big Fisherman* ends.

## 6 THE FOCUS ON JESUS

Notwithstanding its title, the primary focus of *The Big Fisherman* is not on Peter but on Jesus. In full accordance with his purpose of using fiction as a means of communicating the Gospel, an undertaking he had begun during his years as a Congregationalist minister in the USA and Canada, Douglas employed his imaginative story of Peter as a means of calling attention to the teachings and actions of the Redeemer. Within this, great emphasis is placed on the magnetic personality of Jesus, the persuasive power of his healings on those who witness them, and the transforming influence of Christian discipleship on personalities. Peter, Fara, and other people who encounter Jesus with varying degrees of scepticism or hostility become his followers and are thereby changed.

Perhaps nowhere does this ulterior motive emerge more distinctly than in Douglas’s retelling of the Sermon on the Mount, now related in Chapter VIII, when Jesus speaks on a “knoll” south of Bethsaida. In this abridgement of Matthew 5-7, he takes up such matters as the attainment of personal peace by going the second mile, the limits of the principle of “an eye for an eye”, and doing unto others what one would have them do unto oneself (Douglas 1948:172-174). Particularly the teaching concerning retribution is relevant to the plot of *The Big Fisherman*, because Fara, who hears the sermon, has gone to Galilee with the intention of slaying her father for divorcing her mother. The challenging words of Jesus make an impact on the young Arabian girl, though only somewhat later does she put aside her vengeful purpose.

## 7 KURT FRIEBERGER'S CATHOLIC POINT OF DEPARTURE

To a considerable degree Frieberger's account of Peter is cut from a different (and significantly less Christocentric) bolt of cloth, and the garment which he sewed consequently fits the Catholic tradition while differing in many respects from the one Douglas had tailored. There is no reason to believe that Frieberger had read *The Big Fisherman* before he completed his own fictional account, on which in any case he had begun to work while stationed in Rome during the 1930s. *Simon Peter the Fisherman* clearly bears the marks of its time and place of origin, not the least of which are its author's condescending and critical descriptions of Jews in general and his partial glorification of the Roman Empire as beneficial to the proliferation of Christianity.

For the most part, *Simon Peter the Fisherman* is a narratorially conventional work of fiction. Spanning 365 pages in its English translation, it is told from an omniscient narrator point of view. The plot proceeds almost entirely linearly, beginning with Peter as a young man in Galilee who has a wife and infant daughter and who is active in the subversive Gaulonite movement whose goal is the overthrow of Roman hegemony, and ending with his crucifixion during the Neronian persecution approximately forty years later in June, 67 AD. The text is densely religious, especially in its dialogue. Most of the characters rarely utter a word which is not spiritually pregnant. They evince a remarkable ability, moreover, for correctly quoting at length from the oral tradition which was eventually recorded in the canonical gospels.

Frieberger eased the task of those who wish to know the sources of his information about Peter by including both a bibliography and a brief essay on how he had gone about his task. The former includes primarily works by such Catholic scholars as the Jesuit theologians P Urban Holzmeister, Hartmann Grisar, and Georg Bichlmair, but Frieberger also relied on Lutheran and Reformed authorities, among them Adolf von Harnack, Hanns Lillje, and Oskar Cullmann, for his understanding of the apostolic church. The denominational breadth of his sources, however, did not undermine his essential commitment to the traditional and official Catholic understanding of the Petrine origins of the papacy. As Frieberger acknowledged, the purpose of his novel was "to consider from a psychological point of view the miraculous rise of a poor,

illiterate man to become the spiritual prince of the world". He undertook research while living as an Austrian civil servant in Rome during the 1930s, and there he benefitted from access to research materials in libraries and acquaintance with numerous historians. However, after the Austro-German *Anschluß* of 1938, Frieberger found it difficult to bring his work to fruition. He became known as a critic of National Socialism and recalled that during the Second World War it was impossible to get paper for printing the book, which "would have been condemned . . . as 'propaganda for Catholicism'" during the Third Reich. After the restoration of peace, Catholic authorities examined the theological content of Frieberger's novel before Pope Pius XII accepted its dedication to himself. Frieberger also asserted that while he had used both the gospels and the epistles in the New Testament (but did not mention the Acts of Apostles, which he appears to have employed), but he acknowledged that the meagre body of facts about Peter gleaned from those canonical writings had been "supplemented by traditional legends" (Frieberger 1955:361-365). One need only add that Frieberger added a generous portion of authorial imagination to his literary concoction.

Frieberger's portrayal of Peter before encountering Jesus varies notably from Douglas's but also shares some common ground. At the age of fifteen, the protagonist of *Simon Peter the Fisherman* loses his father, who is mortally wounded while resisting Roman hegemony (Frieberger 1955:1). Peter subsequently marries; Frieberger calls his wife "Rahab" (Frieberger 1955:29), but Jesus baptises her as "Joanna" (Frieberger 1955:48). Missing from Frieberger's text is a description of Peter's religious views at this early stage, although to this freedom fighter the Jewish clergy are a lot of sycophantic collaborators who "lick the Romans' shoes" (Frieberger 1955:3).

## 8 THE UNITY OF PETER AND JESUS

The kind of Christianity which Frieberger presupposes dovetails neatly with his emphasis on Peter as the first pope, the head of a permanent religious institution. One will search *Simon Peter the Fisherman* in vain for any trace of the emphasis which the first-century church placed on the Parousia or imminent return of Christ. Such expectations are mentioned, to be sure, but only as negative referents to the established Church of Rome. Clusters of believers who await the Second Coming are portrayed as peripheral,

challengers to the legitimate propagation of the Gospel and the establishment of the faith. In a conversation with Peter after Peter returns briefly to Jerusalem, the apostle Barnabas voices this critical attitude: “The sad condition of the world drives everyone into the arms of the evangelists. Our deacons are obliged to wander farther and farther afield. On all sides communities are blossoming for us. It is Christ they are waiting for, and his Last Judgment, when they can throw all their distress, all their shivering sorrow, into the scales, for they imagine that is all that counts, all that carries weight. But we teach them that what carries most weight of all are Faith, Hope, Charity” (Frieberger 1955:183). The point is re-emphasised later in the narrative. Linus, who in accordance with Catholic tradition would succeed Peter as the bishop of Rome, describes to him the schismatic and chaotic nature of such movements on the periphery of Christendom. He laments that hither and yon “a community becomes dominated by one who wants only to listen to himself and, like some mystagogue of the Great Mother, recites dreadful accounts of the world, and forgets the resurrection.” The remedy, Linus believes, lies in ecclesiastical discipline. “Give us men to lead and teach and to regulate our customs,” he implores Peter, “men who know the road and the goal” (Frieberger 1955:243). Even before travelling to Rome, Peter is involved in the creation of a permanent church, not one living in expectation of the Parousia. In Jerusalem and elsewhere, “Decisions must be taken for centuries to come” (Frieberger 1955:161). For that matter, after Peter is established as the bishop of Rome, he and his fellow apostles are compelled “to decide in which direction to steer [the church] for thousands of years to come” (Frieberger 1955:256).

Instead of awaiting the imminent return of Christ, Peter and his apostolic cohort go about their business of building up the church on earth while looking forward to being in the presence of Christ after death. They propagate the Gospel, baptise large numbers of converts, lead worship, minister to the suffering, administer the sacraments, and attempt to protect the church from persecution, thereby allowing it to become a permanent fixture on the spiritual landscape of the Roman Empire.

## 9 THE EPISCOPAL LEGITIMISATION OF PETER

Much of the plot of *Simon Peter the Fisherman* reflects Frieberger’s two-fold rhetorical strategy of justifying the Catholic teaching that Peter was commissioned by Jesus to head the church and, intimately

linked to that, of stressing an appreciable degree of commonality between the two men. The initial steps in this process occur relatively early in the narrative when Frieberger, drawing on Matthew 16:16-19, reproduces the confession of Peter that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” and Jesus subsequently declares, “you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of hell will not prevail against it”. He adds momentarily, “I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you . . . loosen on earth shall be loosened in heaven” (Frieberger 1955:73). These words of authorisation and empowerment are quoted *verbatim*. After the Crucifixion but before the Resurrection has taken place, Peter confirms his acceptance of this commission in a conversation with James and John, the sons of Zebedee. He relates how he encountered King Solomon and Melchizedek on the day Jesus died, and they informed him that he must first endure a time of preparation for his leadership of the church universal in a way which reflected some of what later became symbols of the papacy. “Only when you can think in æons, so that your forehead requires three bands in order to contain the wine of wisdom, only then have you earned the throne and the diadem” (Frieberger 1955:134).

Before removing Peter from Judea and Galilee and transporting him to Italy, Frieberger establishes what would emerge as the arena of conflict between Christianity and Roman religion. This occurs primarily in a conversation between a Roman centurion, Cornelius, and one of his servants at the former’s villa on the Sea of Galilee. “My Lord and Emperor is the god of Rome,” professes this officer, noting that he had served both Augustus and Tiberius. In contrast to the God of the Christians, “Both of them brought people from life to death, never from death to life” (Frieberger 1955:142-143). Very shortly thereafter, the “haughty” Cornelius confronts Peter and some of the disciples and commands them to abandon their faith: “You call Jesus ‘the Son of the Living God’; nobody is to be your living god, on pain of death, except the Emperor in Rome! Pompeius has defeated your invisible ‘God’” (Frieberger 1955:145). He further ridicules their devotion to the Lord’s Prayer, particularly the petition “Thy Kingdom come”. To Cornelius, this is folly: “Yet the kingdom is still ours, and so is its invincible army. The land is cultivated, we have made roads everywhere. The whole country is opened up for trade. . . . All of it my country, everywhere my people, the universe

my state, and flourishing life on every hand! What can be greater than Rome?" To Peter, the answer is unambiguous: "Our God," he retorts (Frieberger 1955:145-146).

Peter's God has given him the power to work miracles, thereby reinforcing the depiction of Peter as the human head of the church on earth which the risen Christ ultimately leads. The most detailed one is a healing in Rome. Peter's daughter, whom Frieberger has given the name "Petronilla", has fallen ill after inadvertently participating in a heathen pageant. Reminding him, "you who call the keys your own, to bind and to loosen", his wife implores him to use his spiritual power to restore her health. A "multitude" similarly urges him to heal the girl. In response, Peter stands erect before his daughter and commands her: "Get down from your bed, my child, with the help of none but Jesus, and come with me" (Frieberger 1955:238). Petronilla arises, fully healed, and assures her father that "we have been permitted to glorify Jesus through a miracle!" Meanwhile, the assembled multitude places what twentieth-century readers would perceive as a distinctively Catholic stamp on the occasion by expressing their praises in song: "The hymn which the Christian had learned for their high feasts, the Magnificat of the Redeemer's mother, echoed over the valley" (Frieberger 1955:239). Peter's thaumaturgic powers continue to the end. When incarcerated in an underground dungeon in Rome, he is struck heavily by one of the guards, but to their amazement he escapes unscathed from what should have been a severe cranial injury. Instead, the incident leaves his profile stamped on the stone wall against which he has been violently thrust (Frieberger 1955:351-352). Awaiting execution, he miraculously brings forth water from a wall and uses it to baptise his jailers (Frieberger 1955:355). While being led to his place of crucifixion, Peter restores the sight of a blind woman (Frieberger 1955:359).

Perhaps the most explicit expression of the identity of Peter with Jesus occurs during the Neronian persecution when Peter joins a procession of Christians on the outskirts of Rome. He has a vision of Jesus manifested in a man who is bearing the crossbeam to his place of execution. The narrator leaves no doubt about the identity and spiritual significance of Peter and Jesus at that moment: "Now the two men who came to redeem the world through their self-sacrifice stood face to face, as once more" (Frieberger 1955:350). Peter later discusses the incident when he is imprisoned with Paul,

who informs him that they had been sentenced to death, Peter by crucifixion. The encounter confirms Peter's elevation to the position as the supreme apostle. Although Paul had previously been the last to see the risen Christ, namely on the Damascus road as recorded in Acts 9, in the end it is Peter who has the pride of position, the last to see Jesus, on the Appian Way, and hearing him say, "I am going to Rome, to be crucified once more." Peter believes that the second crucifixion of Christ was to occur in his own death (Frieberger 1955:357).

## **10 THE UNAMBIGUOUS ECCLESIASTICAL STATURE OF PETER**

About Peter's lofty status as the chief of the apostles and the head of the church universal Frieberger leaves no doubt. His position already established in Galilee and Judea, he evinces his leadership qualities internationally even before reaching Rome. This is initially expressed metaphorically. *En route* to Italy when a storm besets the ship on which he is a passenger, Peter personally takes command of the vessel when its captain and crew are too cowed to carry out their responsibilities, "provided that everyone would obey him implicitly". Navigating the high seas of the Mediterranean was a bold new step for this apostle, whose previous maritime experience had been limited to fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee. Peter's seamanship is an expression of his churchmanship: "He tried out a number of commands and manœuvres with the Syrian sailors, to make sure they understood him fully, said a prayer to him who was able to walk the waters in the storm, and took the tiller himself." Peter dares to venture out of sight of familiar landmarks, though supposedly "no sailor on the high seas dared do that". He does so confidently, however, knowing that his guidance comes from on high: "Fortunately, the stars, so familiar to the fisherman, were appearing" (Frieberger 1955:193). The man who would steer the *navus* of the church universal through the turbulent straits of persecution thus establishes his credentials even before taking up his position as bishop of Rome. Moreover, chronologically Peter does not play second fiddle in evangelising the Gentiles. He has begun his ministry in Rome before Paul and Barnabas initiate the evangelisation of Asia Minor as recounted in Acts 13-14 (Frieberger 1955:213).

After landing at Pisa, Peter enjoys a noteworthy amount of comforts and respect, in part due to the largesse of a wealthy

Egyptian Christian who has accompanied him to Italy. But the adulation Peter receives is not merely from a few social elitists. In Rome, he commands immense authority from the outset. Addressing one crowd, Peter has the audacity to denounce Roman deities as “poor demons”. In response, “A tremendous sigh from thousands of oppressed hearts rose trembling into the quiet room, then all at once, as with one mouth, the multitude cried: ‘*Simon Petrus! Petrus! Ave!*’” (Frieberger 1955:220). Frieberger’s penchant for expressing numbers of biblical proportions at times undermines the credibility of his narrative. Peter’s Egyptian friend Ptolemy relates how Peter had preached forgiveness and “hundreds of thousands” of people in his audience “wholeheartedly forgave all those who had sinned against them” (Frieberger 1955:224).

Although long wracked by guilt feelings about his denials of Jesus before the Resurrection, Peter has gained full self-confidence before going to Rome, and he eventually harbours no doubt that God has commissioned him to head the church. Indeed, this, coupled with examples of his ecclesiastical and spiritual authority, become *Leitmotive* in the final third of the narrative. “The moment you come into a meeting place . . . where there has just been a clash of opinion, and those with grievances are complaining, everything is quiet,” declares Mark, who is also in Rome. “There you are, as if you had all their souls in your hands and held them out to the Lord. . .” (Frieberger 1955:240-241). Peter has the power to pass judgment on Scripture, as well. After Mark completes writing his gospel, “it was to be read out so that Peter might approve it . . .” (Frieberger 1955:242). Indeed, in order to tone down the adulatory references to himself, the bishop of Rome insists on certain changes in the text, which Mark obligingly makes (Frieberger 1955:249-250).

In the Eternal City people outside the church are quite cognisant of Peter’s authority over the “groups of Chosen Ones”. The government is clearly nervous about it at an early stage. Cornelius, now in Rome, informs him that “one thing the Senate knows, the Emperor knows, and that is that you are master of them all, lord of a universal kingdom” (Frieberger 1955:282). Peter’s authority over the church is acknowledged not merely in Rome but also in Jerusalem. Frieberger even bolsters this with a physical sign lacking all subtlety. Addressing the apostolic council in the latter city, he “straightens up to his full height” and announces, “All the flocks are mine and the gates of Hell will have no power over them”

(Frieberger 1955:262). Approximately twenty years after the Resurrection, the universal body of believers is referred to as “his growing Church” (Frieberger 1955:290). Even Paul believes himself subordinate to the bishop of Rome: “When he saw the Rock rear up so mightily before him, the thought entered his mind that Peter had the power of life and death over him; he remembered the fate of Simon the Magus” (Frieberger 1955:291-292).

As the capstone of his return to Jerusalem after many years in Rome, Peter has a vision of his legacy. He sees himself as “the living Rock of God which bore the everlasting Church, and which held up to his Maker all that mankind would create in the future of beauty, of greatness, of immortality.” Indeed, the veil of the sixteenth century is lifted, and before the eyes of the chief apostle “his own gigantic mausoleum began to arch above him as a new firmament, a new heaven over a new earth, the cupola of Saint Peter’s in Rome”. The present and future are also merged in music: “Silver fanfares blared for victory, and the Hallelujah of the choirs rejoiced: ‘Tu es Petrus’” (Frieberger 1955:293). Right to the end Peter’s headship is underscored. In his final words while being crucified, he prays: “I am carrying my Church, I am carrying you, my God, into eternity” (Frieberger 1955:360).

Frieberger presents his case that the firm ecclesiastical leadership which only Peter could provide was a *conditio sine qua non* for the survival of the apostolic church. Before Peter sets matters right in Rome, “the sure and firm edifice was still lacking” there (Frieberger 1955:240). The number of converts in the capital rises exponentially, but they are a fractious lot. As one grave-digger confides to Peter, “The more believers there are, the more they split up, away from each other. Everyone clings to his own opinion, certain it’s the only right one” (Frieberger 1955:272). Peter succeeds in providing ecclesiastical stability and unity, not least by overcoming the influence of Simon Magus, who repents shortly before his death and utters “Peter” as his final word (Frieberger 1955:277).

Peter’s influence eventually extends far beyond Rome; he becomes the “shepherd of the world” (Frieberger 1955:283). After passing the torch to Linus, he travels to the periphery of the Roman Empire – to Sicily, North Africa, Spain, Gaul, and even Britain. On these pastoral journeys, Peter “brought order to the sacred customs and divine teachings”. Furthermore, “Childish superstitions he

checked with implacable sternness, so as to impress the true Word on his helpless flock" (Frieberger 1955:310-311).

## 11 CONCLUSION

That both Douglas and Frieberger found it necessary to use extracanonical sources to supplement the scant information which the New Testament provides when creating their narratives Peter is beyond dispute. Both authors employed their literary imaginations extensively and, arguably, if one acknowledges as legitimate the criteria which some of their contemporaries writing in the same genre sought to follow, irresponsibly in fleshing out the skeletal accounts in the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

In his discussion of "fidelity to the text" in his study of *The Biblical Novel*, Arnold D Ehlert quoted numerous writers who had adopted standards too stringent for either Douglas or Frieberger to meet. Florence M. Bauer, for example, the author of such works as *Abram Son of Terah*, *Behold Your King*, *Daughter of Nazareth*, insisted that it was inadmissible to take "liberties with the actual Bible text, except to modernize the English after consulting more than eight modern translations". On the other hand, she regarded it as defensible to supplement the canonical texts with imaginary narrative and dialogue. Similarly, Margaret Cate, author of *Without a Sword*, believed that it was permissible, indeed virtually inevitable, "to telescope into a brief period of time events which were widely separated" but professed that she would not "put imaginary words into the mouths of historical characters" (Ehlert 1960:4-5).

What of particular significance to emerge from our comparative study is the way in which Douglas and Frieberger, given their notably different points of departure, supplemented the biblical sources. That the Austrian Catholic in his novel dedicated to Pope Pius XII adhered to the doctrinally conservative tradition that Peter went to Rome and became its first bishop is not at all surprising; indeed, any explicit departure from that doctrine would have been noteworthy. Yet within the orthodox Catholic framework of his narrative, Frieberger took numerous liberties with regard to such matters, some of which were undoubtedly secondary ones in his view, as the names of Peter's relatives and his activities before he became a disciple. Far more consequential, of course, is Frieberger's fictional construction of Peter's ministry in Rome, his ecclesiastical status there, and his vision of himself as the foundation of the

institutional church. When perceived through critical eyes, the artificiality of these matters and their creation to undergird received Catholic doctrine are patent.

The way in which the liberal Protestant Douglas ventured beyond his sources in constructing his fiction is more complicated. He, too, took liberties in fleshing out the biblical Peter and in linking that apostle's story to the history of the Near East in the first century AD. As indicated earlier, part of Douglas's chronology lacks credibility. More surprising is his brief dalliance with the Catholic tradition of Peter's bishopric in Rome, although in this regard the ministry there is significantly different from that which Frieberger portrays.

Both in their strengths and in their flaws, these works by Douglas and Frieberger, particularly when juxtaposed with each other, reveal much about the fragility of the New Testament when subjected to the imaginations of literary artists. Independently of one another, the Austrian Catholic and the American Protestant each created a captivating novel in which Peter is brought to life as a religious figure who meshes well with his maker's denominational proclivities. Considered together, however, the two novels reveal above all else the vulnerability of historical figures in the hands of men of letters whose dedication to latter-day agendas can outstrip their devotion to the biblical sources in question.

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