



## SIMON PETER

*Eyewitness  
to  
the Majesty***By Dale "Geno" Robinson**

**F**ROM A ROMAN PRISON in about A.D. 65-68, the apostle Peter saw his spiritual children in trouble. Outside forces engaged the churches in Asia Minor in a white-hot battle for the faith. Society pressured believers to substandard Christian behavior. Seductive false teaching sought to corrupt their doctrine. They needed redirection and reassurance. They needed answers that addressed and corrected the dangers and distractions that threatened them.

Peter wrote his second letter to those beleaguered followers to instruct them in spiritual maturity and the defense of the faith. To do that he appealed to a forceful standard that would bolster their faith and answer all criticism. He reminded them that since he personally and with his own eyes witnessed Jesus' majesty (2 Pet. 1:16) his teaching was true and his apostolic authority was sure.

**Witnesses of the Transfiguration**

At Caesarea Philippi Peter confessed that Jesus was "the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" (Matt. 16:13-29).<sup>1</sup> A few days later on the mountain, God confirmed that confession. God drove Peter, James, and John to their faces in terror at His presence and awesome glory. Now, as Peter spoke of "majesty," he referred to Jesus' transfiguration and the signs that accompanied it (Matt. 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36). What Peter, James, and John experienced conclusively proved to them that Jesus was both Messiah and God.

The transfiguration met Peter's messianic expectations. Moses, who prophesied, became the model for Messiah's role as law-giver (compare Deut. 18:15,18 and John 5:46). Moses was there with Jesus. Elijah, the Messiah's forerunner (Mal. 4:5-6), appeared in order to announce

Messiah's advent. Both spoke with Jesus (Mark 9:4). Moses symbolized the Law while Elijah personified the prophets. Thus, the two great streams of Old Testament thought found fulfillment in Jesus in that encounter.

Two other signs demonstrated Jesus' majesty: the great cloud and the voice. The cloud signaled the glory of God's presence with His people during the exodus and on the mountain when God gave Moses the Law (Ex. 19:9,16). It manifested itself at the tabernacle (40:34-35) and at the dedication of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:10-11). Centuries later, Daniel linked the cloud-accompanying glory of God with the messianic Son of Man (Dan. 7:13-14).

After 400 years of divine silence, the witnesses heard God's voice. As before, when cloud and voice combined, God was present and spoke. These actions confirmed to them that Jesus was the Messiah. God spoke to command them: "This is My beloved Son. I take delight in Him. Listen to Him!" (Matt. 17:5).

**A Legal Witness**

The events at the transfiguration provided a foundational proof that Jesus was Messiah and that God had empowered Peter, James, and John. The three saw the messianic heralds. They heard the unmistakable voice of God from the cloud. They sensed the fear of the Lord. Peter built his life and ministry on this sure foundation. The specific and objective reality gave Peter the foundation of his appeal to the readers of his second epistle.

Peter's claim to have witnessed Jesus' "majestic glory" met the Jewish standard for a legal truth. Deuteronomy 19:15 established the means of determining truth: "One witness cannot establish any wrongdoing or sin against a person, whatever that person has done. A fact must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."

A court could impose the death penalty based on the testimony of two witnesses. Old Testament law said,



A fresco in the nave of the Sandal Church at Goreme in Cappadocia depicting Jesus' transfiguration.



**Above: The Mamertine prison in Rome, where Paul was imprisoned at one time. It is beneath the church of Giuseppe dei Falegname in**

**modern Rome. Tradition says Peter was also held here during his imprisonment in Rome. Notice that the altar has an upside-down cross on the front,**

**the position in which Peter was purportedly crucified. Right: Entrance to the Church of the Transfiguration atop Mount Tabor.**

“The one condemned to die is to be executed on the testimony of two or three witnesses. No one is to be executed on the testimony of a single witness” (Deut. 17:6).

Three witnesses would seal a murderer’s fate. The report of two or three witnesses confirmed a claim or event as the irrefutable truth.

To serve as a witness was a solemn obligation. Deuteronomy 17:7 declares, “The witnesses’ hands are to be the first in putting him to death, and after that, the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from you.” Not only were two witnesses necessary to prove a person guilty and to impose the death penalty, the law required witnesses to serve as executioners. Peter acted on his belief, proving that he was certain of the objective reality and truth of his experience by writing the letter and appealing to his experience. He knew he was a faithful witness to what he had seen.

### **Fact, Not Fiction**

Peter used the unassailable nature of his legally proven, factual gospel to refute the claims and challenges of the false teachers that plagued his people. Peter’s gospel was true and he could prove it. Why then did he need to declare his teachings were not “cleverly contrived myths”? Scholars suggest two possible reasons. He possibly wanted to contrast his truth against the obvious mythology of the teachers. Or, the false teachers may have claimed his teaching was nothing more than religious fiction, an assertion he could handily refute.



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Peter claimed that the doctrine of these false teachers was not fact but “cleverly invented stories”<sup>2</sup> manufactured to support their claims. Peter supported his teaching with details about the time, place, persons involved, and sounds at the event. As an eyewitness, he accurately communicated objective reality to his readers. He saw God’s glory, manifest as a bright cloud, on the mount of transfiguration. He had the requisite other eyewitnesses to back up his story. The false teachers had flimsy, “cleverly contrived myths.”

The false teachers challenged the historical reality and thus the truth of the incarnation, and the second coming. They claimed Peter’s teachings were contrived fables, false and unworthy of belief. Peter countered by presenting forensic evidence. His references met the legal requirement for truth. His teaching could hold up in a court of law. The doctrine of the false teachers could not.



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**Above: Replica of the tabernacle set up in southern Israel, at Timna.**

**Left: People believed the cave opening at the far end of the cliff at Caesarea Philippi was the abode of the god Pan. People and animals alike, given as ritual sacrifices, were**

**cast into the underground waters at the back of the cave. If the victims disappeared in the water, this was a sign that the god had accepted the offering. If, however, blood appeared in the nearby springs, people believed the gods had rejected the sacrifice.**

## Public Secrets

Being an eyewitness gave Peter a distinctive edge when dealing with syncretistic teaching derived from Greek philosophy, incipient gnosticism, and mystery religions. Each of these movements relied heavily on the idea of secret knowledge, or “mysteries.” According to the popular way of thinking, “knowledge,” known only to the initiated, was the key to salvation.<sup>3</sup> If a person knew the mysteries,<sup>4</sup> they guaranteed their salvation. These ideas were influential competitors to Christianity throughout Asia Minor.

Some scholars suggest that in verses 16-18 Peter cast himself as the supreme initiate who was revealing the deepest mysteries of salvation to everyone. Using their own language against them, he proved that his message was far superior to theirs. What they kept hidden in secret darkness, he showed in the

light. When they could not meet the test of objective truth, his now-public mysteries could. His gospel was truth. Their teachings were false. He proved it.

## A Last Testament

Peter’s testimony has the flavor of a man at the end of his life wanting to leave a legacy. He wrote he would soon “lay aside my tent” and about his coming “departure” (2 Pet. 1:14,15). His reminder that he was an eyewitness was a capstone in his legacy. It motivated him and empowered his apostolic authority. For Simon Peter, conveying what he had seen on the mountain that day served as his great and final testament to his beloved people. **B**

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. 2 Peter 1:16, NIV.

3. Rudolf Bultmann, “γινώσκω, γινώσις,” (*ginisko, gnosis, to know, knowledge*) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 693.

4. Gunther Bornkamm, “μυστήριον” (*musterion, mystery*) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 802-28.

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