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Texts and Trivia: The Denials of Peter

By Ernest Bursey

I am a reader of texts, intentional accumulations of words both ancient and modern. I seek to read these texts in the widening circles of cultural and literary contexts, and to acknowledge and even expedite the intersections of those circles with my own more familiar cultural circles. But my ability to catch all intended cues and comparisons while reading the snippets about Peter's denials in the New Testament Gospels is severely limited. I am disadvantaged by the large distance in time that cannot be closed. I am further constrained by the understated style of the Gospel story tellers and by my ability (or inability!) to read the few lines about Peter's denials in one of the Gospels while keeping in mind all the other sayings and snippets in this particular mosaic of recollections. I am especially limited by my own imagination that extrapolates significance the way a child alone in the house interprets random sounds and imagines movement in the shadows.

As a teacher, I often deal with facts of trivia—the kind of material that turns up on a multiple choice examination: Is the distance from Jerusalem to Qumran (a) 15 miles? (b) 40 miles? (c) 60 miles? (d) 75 miles? This kind of trivia can be significant. Fifteen miles from Jerusalem, the spiritual and cultural center of Judaism, with abundant rainfall for human habitation, there exists a desolate region so arid that ancient papyrus scrolls stored in hillside caves were preserved over two millennia.

A single piece of data from a text—a piece of trivia—can shatter a worldview, like a shard of concrete dropped from a freeway overpass. It happened to Robert Olson. While sitting in a library carrel at Southwestern Baptist Seminary, he read I Enoch for the first time as part of the assigned reading in his doctoral studies. In the first chapter he ran across lines identical to lines in Jude. He realized at once that Jude, a canonical and therefore

inspired writer, had quoted from I Enoch, a pseudonymous and therefore dishonest book, about the alleged heavenly travels of Enoch. The author of Jude did not even acknowledge the source of the quotation. In a recent conversation, Olson retold me how this unexpected finding profoundly disturbed him and altered for all time his understanding of inspiration. As a believer in Divine Providence, he observed how this disruptive discovery prepared him for his role as the head of the Ellen G. White Estate at a time when the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its scholars were confronted with the discovery of Mrs. White's extensive use of sources.

I, too, have undergone a hermeneutical conversion of sorts while engaged in the reading of Scripture, albeit a more gradual and more drawn out conversion than Olson's. This article is a witness to that conversion and to my conviction as a believer that I have gained much more than I have lost.

How Many Ate with Me at Palby's?

Before examining the Gospel data, let's look at a personal story to understand the verisimilitudes of eyewitnesses. My wife and I were married more than thirty-eight years ago in Napa, California. As I remember, all of our family members were there. One memory that has stuck in my mind was the verbal battle between the photographer and the wedding coordinator shortly before the wedding began. Then I remember the most beautiful woman coming down the aisle in a borrowed wedding gown on the arm of her father. I remember worrying about the pastor, standing inches in front of me, because he seemed to sway while his hands shook during the homily about the Garden of Eden. We knelt while my father sang the Lord's Prayer. At the receiving line I was surprised to see one of my professors. At present, I cannot remember who he was.

I remember our hair-raising escape ride after the reception, with my father driving our getaway car, the headlights off to elude the pack of pursuers. He even drove on one-way streets the wrong way. Our families gathered afterward at Palby's, a restaurant outside of Napa, to eat before we took off on our honeymoon. I remember later that night, after saying goodbye to our families, that Beth and I secretly drove back to St. Helena to the apartment that became our home. Exhausted, we slept most of the next twenty-four hours.

Suppose I were asked to write a more complete description of our wedding. There are more details in my mind, but I have forgotten a lot. To write a story

about our wedding, I would need help. I could use the black and white wedding pictures to "refresh my memory." I could draw on my own knowledge of what usually happens at weddings. I could rely on my wife's much better memory for details.

After reading the paragraph that I have written about my wedding my wife pointed out that all our family members were not there. Her brother was unable to get a leave from his navy duty. Furthermore, she knows that only the two of us ate a meal at Palby's while my family packed up to return to Arizona. She's probably right, although my memory bank has the whole group there. The point is that I was there and the difficulties over the details would not prove otherwise.

If I decided to write about our wedding it is likely that I would have a specific reason to do so. Whatever details I chose to include would have to lend support to the reason(s) for my writing about it. I would even leave out information I knew if it distracted from that purpose. This is even true of the version you just received.

Now, back to Peter's denials.

Accounting for the Difficult Trivia in the Stories of Peter's Denials

The four accounts of Peter's denials cannot be harmonized easily into a seamless whole.¹ The differences in detail, chronology, and geography defy a facile solution. Even the "eyewitnesses" differ with Peter himself; they give two different versions, if we accept the church tradition that portrays him as the source for Mark and John.

Notice the divergence among the Gospels in identifying the second accuser. For Matthew, it is "another slave girl (Greek feminine: *halle*, "another"), a different slave girl from the one who accused Peter in the first round (Matt. 26:71). For Mark, the accuser is the same slave girl who accused Peter the first time (Mark 14:69). According to Luke, the second person to accuse Peter is referred to as "someone else" (Luke 22:58). In the original Greek language, this pronoun is masculine, not feminine. Peter's reply, "Man, I am not," clarifies the matter, even for the reader of a modern English version.

This conflict illustrates several challenges the four accounts present for those who hold a position of absolute biblical inerrancy. John and the Synoptic



Gospels differ considerably from each other on the time, location, and wording of the denials. Furthermore, Luke differs from Matthew and Mark. It is not surprising that defenders of biblical inerrancy may choose to omit this account in their treatment of alleged difficulties.²

Even with the differences, the story of Peter's denial appears to pass the acid tests of historical criticism. The story was not likely to have been fabricated out of whole cloth.³ Peter was too important a leader in the early church and the event too shameful. In fact, within a twenty-four hour period there were three shameful scandals: (1) Jesus' betrayal by Judas, a member of his inner circle; (2) the denial by Peter, the leading disciple; and (3) Jesus' execution on the cross as an enemy of the Roman Empire. The Gospels show Jesus knowing all of these in advance. Here the historian who denies the supernatural parts company from the believing historian who does not.

From a historian's point of view the differences are quite understandable. The stories about Jesus and his disciples were old stories when the authors of the Gospels got around to writing their books. At least two of the New Testament Gospel writers were not present, so they had to listen to others for all their information. We shouldn't be surprised at the differences among the four accounts. However, the believer wonders what has happened to the role of the Holy Spirit in such an approach.

Examining the Believers' Options

Believers confronted for the first time with such conflicts in the Bible thus are surprised or even disturbed because they believe that the Bible cannot contain errors if it is inspired by an infallible God who possesses the truth. If there are errors in small details, how can we be confident in the larger matters?

Concerned believers intent on establishing the historicity of the Bible may try to find comfort by deciding that one of the authors was closer to the event or in some other way was more reliable as a writer. This approach runs the risk of denigrating one part of the Bible in order to save the historicity of another part, which results in a canon within the larger canon. Selecting the most historically reliable among the Gospel accounts of Peter's denials has its problems, even for conservative scholars like myself who accept the traditional authorship of the four Gospels.

Matthew as tax collector was likely to have brought a carefulness cultivated with calculating numbers to his writing assignment. According to early tradition, Mark wrote the memoirs of Peter, who certainly was an eye witness.⁵ At the onset of his Gospel, the historian Luke declares his care in getting the story straight from eyewitnesses and other reputable persons (Luke 1-3). If the unnamed disciple who let Peter into the high priest's courtyard was the one Jesus loved and whose testimony the believers explicitly supported, then the unique

features of the Gospel of John cannot be dismissed (18:15, 16; 21:2-23). Seventh-day Adventist readers may decide to ask Ellen G. White, author of *The Desire of Ages*, to have the last word and allow her inspired writings to show which Gospel account is accurate. However, she has indicated that her writings are not to be used to settle details of history.

Another approach is to show that differences in the accounts actually do not contradict each other, even if they seem to.⁶ This willingness to continue looking for solutions that dissolve apparent contradictions

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Denial of Jesus by Peter:

	MATT. 26:69-70	MARK 14:66-68	LUKE 22:56-57	JOHN 18:17-18
SEQUENCE	after trial of Jesus	after trial of Jesus		before interrogation of Jesus
PLACE	in the <i>aule</i>	in the <i>aule</i> at the fire (54)	in the middle of the <i>aule</i> (55) at the fire	at the gate (<i>thyra</i>) while entering
QUESTIONER	servant girl	one of the servant girls	servant girl	servant girl who kept the gate
QUESTION OR ACCUSATION	"You too were with [<i>meta</i>] Jesus the Galilean"	"You too were with [<i>meta</i>] the Nazarene Jesus"	"This one too was with [<i>syn</i>] him?"	"Are you too one of this man's disciples?"
REPLY	He denied it before all: "I don't know what you are talking about"	He denied it: "I don't know or understand what you are talking about"	He denied it: "Woman, I don't know him"	"No, I am not"

stands us all in good stead while dealing with incomplete information. But efforts to harmonize in the service of an unbending theory of an error-free Bible can at times lead to complicated and even improbable explanations.

Leon Morris appeals to the group setting of the denials as the probable cause for the differences over who accused Peter the second time: "Our difficulty probably arises because we unconsciously think that in each case one person asked the question and that was that. A moment's reflection, however, shows that this would almost certainly not have been the case. With a group of servants talking informally round a fire in the courtyard when one asked whether Peter were a disciple it is almost certain that others would take the question up, especially if there were any hesitation about the answer."⁷

Morris finds it necessary to split Peter's second denial into two parts—one taken by Mark and one by John. William Hendriksen prefers to see John omitting the second denial, as found in Mark, and breaking the third denial into two denials.⁸ Each account ends up with three denials. This approach presumes that the Gospel authors were constrained to show that Jesus' prediction of a three-fold denial had indeed been fulfilled. So they imposed order on the rather chaotic data. As such, we cannot prove or disprove with the data at hand that Peter denied Jesus exactly three times, as Jesus predicted, and neither more nor less. Such an approach is not satisfactory to more literal minds.

Harold Lindsell forwards the suggestion of I. M. Cheney that Jesus warned Peter two separate times he would deny Jesus three times, which resulted in Peter denying Jesus six times, with the rooster crowing at the end of each set of three denials! As Lindsell acknowledges, "This man had labored long and hard to reconcile problems connected with some of the apparent discrepancies in the New Testament."⁹

Most believers I know go on to deny that the differences add up to anything important. Ordinary people can see that the basic story is the same in all the accounts: Jesus said Peter would deny knowing him three times, and later, in spite of his protest and a promise to do otherwise, Peter ended up denying him three times. The differences in the details seem to be minor, even irrelevant. The majority of the students in my courses react this way.

Don't Lose the Details

At this point, I regularly swim against the tides of my students' indifference by suggesting they have set aside the details as irrelevant too quickly. They ought

to consider the possibility that the details in each Gospel serve as signposts that point readers to the reason why the story is told. Seen this way, the four versions of Peter's denial provide four different perspectives in viewing this unforgettable experience. These different perspectives need not inherently be in conflict, though some of the details may appear irreconcilable and their origins unclear.

The assumption in this approach is that the reader is not invited to judge the detail of one Gospel account as true and dismiss that of another as false. This approach does not deny the legitimacy of historical reconstruction, although the plethora of hypothetical reconstructions on the right and left ought to caution us. What we presently have are four somewhat differing versions of the same event. Our primary effort as believing exegetes and servants of the Word is to listen carefully to each account for what it offers. I find this task almost forgotten in the discussions and defenses. What follows suggests the promise in this approach.

Mark: Ready for the Advent and Coping with Persecution

Among the four Gospels, the book of Mark stands out as a story. Sermonic interruptions are minimal. Peter's denial is part of a dramatic section that illustrates the importance of being ready for the Second Coming of Christ and how to survive persecution that will occur before it. In the eschatological discourse of Mark 13 Jesus outlines to several of his disciples the troubles about to come upon the world, particularly upon the followers of Jesus. There will be persecution on a grand scale and great tribulation that would utterly destroy all human life if not for the intervention of God (13:9-20). In the end, the Son of Man will suddenly appear and those he left in charge will be judged by their readiness. This crisis surpasses even the crisis of persecution.

To emphasize this point, Jesus tells the story of a master who leaves home, puts his slaves in charge of affairs, and commands the doorkeeper to be on watch



(13:34). Turning to his disciples, Jesus orders them to “Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come and find you asleep” (13:35, 36). In a final command, which dramatically includes all hearers, Jesus declares “what I say to you I say to all—keep watch” (Mark 13:33–37). The readers of Mark are cued to be alert for the coming of their Lord as if they are guards awake at the doorway, whether he comes at midnight or when the rooster crows.

With this warning to watch fixed firmly in mind, the

reader is carried by the narrative to the final night, when Peter promises that, unlike the other disciples, he will not fall (Greek: *skandalisthesontai*) (14:29). At this point, Jesus informs Peter of his impending threefold denial. Peter vehemently protests that he would rather die than deny Jesus (14:30, 31). Immediately, the scene shifts to Gethsemane, where the warning language of 13:33–37 reappears. Jesus tells Peter and two others to “keep watch” (v. 34; compare 13:37), as if they were on guard. Later, he “comes and finds them sleeping” (14:37), words repeated from 13:35. Jesus asks Peter, “Are you asleep? Could you not watch for one hour?” (v. 37). Again, “he came and found them sleeping” (v. 40). As wakeful listeners, we know that the warning in the sermon and the scene in Gethsemane should be connected.

Acting to overthrow his own promise that Peter would deny him three times, Jesus tries to prepare Peter while he prepares himself. He singles out Peter with instructions to “watch and pray” (14:38). Three times Jesus comes to strengthen Peter. The Gethsemane narrative shows the alert reader that merely being physically awake is not enough. As one on guard, the follower of Jesus must be in prayer, otherwise he will “enter into temptation” (Greek: *peirasmos*) (14:38). It has become clear that Peter was not called to stand guard for Jesus, but to guard his own soul. However, Peter falls asleep again and again. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, Jesus explains. This weakness of the flesh accounts not only for Peter’s sleeping, but also for his cowardice.

At Jesus’ arrest, Peter follows at a distance and mingles with the guards (Greek: *huperetai*) around the fire. After the religious leaders condemn Jesus to death and physically abuse him, the same guards receive him with blows (14:65). Peter’s denial immediately follows mention of the guards striking Jesus. Now the weakness of the flesh appears to be cowardice in the face of violence. It is one thing to promise to go to death, but quite another to stand up to the immediate prospects. Otherwise, the narrative gives no clue as to why Peter would go back on his promise to die for Jesus.

Quickly and skillfully, Mark sketches Peter’s fall into the abyss. First a slave girl confronts Peter. She belongs to the high priest, who has just presided over Jesus’ death sentence. There is no mention of any other persons, although we can not rule it out.¹⁰ Peter clumsily claims that he cannot understand what she is saying and tries



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to duck outside, but she follows and starts telling those standing around that “this man is one of them.” Finally, the others challenge him! He utters a curse on either himself or Jesus. So Peter’s three denials provide negative reinforcement to Jesus’ command back in chapter 13 to all readers to “watch.” In contrast, Jesus passes his own trial, having been awake and in prayer submitted to the Father’s will.

To conclude, Mark connects a long discourse to a longer narrative by means of the exchange in Gethsemane through the word “watch” and the phrase “he came and found them sleeping.” As a result, Mark’s subsequent account of Peter’s denial shows readers who wait for Jesus’ return how to cope with the anticipated persecution and trials he promised would happen before the end-time. The coming of Jesus to Peter in Gethsemane is a merciful penultimate to that final coming, which cannot otherwise be illustrated in the available stock of vignettes available to Mark. The expositor will settle on the truth that all was decided in Gethsemane, the place of prayer—both for Jesus and for Peter.

Matthew: Prayer Life Prepares Us for Public Testimony

Much of Matthew 27 reads like Mark. Matthew also contrasts Peter with Jesus, both in Gethsemane and in their respective trials. However, in Matthew the trials of both Jesus and Peter are described more precisely along the lines of a proper Jewish trial. In Jewish terms, at least two witnesses must provide the same accusation (Matt.18:16; Deut. 19:15). Whereas Mark has one slave girl accusing Peter in an escalating drama, Matthew presents two slave girls who utter the same accusation in two separate scenes.¹¹

Matthew has not reduced Peter’s denials from three to two, but he presents the first two accusations in virtually identical language. This is true only of Matthew’s version. In Matthew, the trials of both Jesus and Peter involve only two persons who aver the

	MATT. 26:71-72	MARK 14:69-70a	LUKE 22:58	JOHN 18:25
1 SEQUENCE	after Peter had moved inside	after Peter had moved inside	after a short time	after interrogation of Jesus
2 PLACE	outside the <i>aule</i> in gateway (<i>pylon</i>)	outside the <i>aule</i> in forecourt (<i>proaulion</i>)	in the middle of the <i>aule</i> (55) by the fire	in the <i>aule</i> by the fire
3 QUESTIONER	another servant girl	same servant girl	another (a man)	“they” = servants and police (18)
4 QUESTION OR ACCUSATION	“This man was with Jesus of Nazareth”	“This man is one of them”	“You too are one of them”	“Are you too one of his disciples?”
5 REPLY	He denied it again with an oath: “I don’t know the man”	He denied it again	“Man, I am not”	He denied it: “No, I am not”

same charge (26:6-62, 69-72). Notice that the accusations the witnesses in Matthew make against both Peter and Jesus are true, in contrast to Mark’s version.¹² According to the false witnesses in Mark’s account, Jesus is accused of saying that he will destroy the temple, whereas in Matthew’s account two witnesses speak of Jesus claiming to be able to destroy the temple. For at least Matthew’s Christian readers, this claim would be seen as true.

Earlier in the book, Jesus had promised his followers that they would be arrested and placed on public trial, where they would be given the opportunity to testify about him. They were not to worry about what to say, for the Spirit of their Father would speak in them (10:16-20, 24-26).¹³ Matthew finds an illustration of this promised publicity in the stories of Jesus and Peter. To help the reader make the connections, Matthew tells us that Peter denies the slave girl’s first accusation “before all.” Only Matthew explicitly declares the first denial to be public. In this way, the trial of Jesus and all three of Peter’s denials emerge in Matthew as opportunities to give public testimony! Jesus had promised his followers that they would be brought before governors and kings to give their testimony (10:18). In Jesus’ case, this happens when he is brought before Pilate (27:1-26). However, Peter fails his preliminary trial in front of slave girls and soldiers, all because he had not prepared in the garden.

Jesus’ prohibition in Matthew against uttering oaths (5:33-37) is illustrated twice in the rest of the



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Denial of Jesus by Peter:

	MATT. 26:71-72	MARK 14:69-70a	LUKE 22:58	JOHN 18:25
11 SEQUENCE	after a little while	after a little while	after about an hour's interval	immediately?
12 PLACE	no change	no change	no change	no change
13 QUESTIONER	the bystanders	the bystanders	another (a man)	servant of high priest, relative of man Peter hit
14 QUESTION OR ACCUSATION	"Truly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you"	"Truly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean"	"In truth, this one too was with him, for he is a Galilean"	"Didn't I see you with him in the garden?"
15 REPLY	He began to curse and swear: "I don't know the man"	He began to curse and swear: "I don't know this man you are talking about"	"I don't know what you are talking about"	He denied it again
16 Cockcrow	Immediately a cock crowed and Peter remembered what Jesus had said Peter wept bitterly	Immediately a cock crowed a second time and Peter remembered what Jesus had said Peter wept	At that moment a cock crowed while he was speaking Peter recalled the word of the Lord after the Lord looked at him Peter wept bitterly	Just then a cock crowed

gender of the second questioner differs, and there are differences in apparent audiences for the accusations and the answers Peter gives. Only in Luke does Jesus ("the Lord") look directly at Peter after the third denial. In the book of Acts attention is drawn to the gaze of the apostle (14:9) or the sufferer (3:4, 5; 9:40) in the healing.

In Luke 22:31-32, earlier that night before Jesus is arrested, Jesus tells Peter that Satan desires to "sift" all of the disciples like a farmer separating wheat from chaff. He assures Peter that "I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail. And when you

book. Herod utters an oath in the presence of his guests (14:7) to give Herodias whatever she asks. Peter's denials provide the second illustration of the folly of oath taking. In Matthew's version, Peter utters an oath to accompany both the second and third denials (26:72, 74). Again, only Matthew among the four has this doubled oath, which illustrates a point Jesus made earlier in his teaching: anything more than "yes" or "no" comes from the evil one (5:37).

Luke: Our Survival Depends on Jesus' Prayers

Luke's narrative of Peter's denials is more expansive in detail and style. For instance, a maid, "seeing him as he sat in the light and gazing at him," says, "this man also was with him" (22:56). Luke T. Johnson writes of "Luke's gentler treatment of the apostles."¹⁴ There is no cursing and uttering of oaths, as in Matthew and Mark. Instead, Peter addresses his accusers respectively as "woman" and "man." One is tempted to make a comparison between the Genesis account of the fall, where first the woman and then the man succumb. Here, in Luke, Peter is confronted first by a woman and then by a man. There are other potentially significant differences between Luke and the other Synoptics. In Luke, all the denials take place in the courtyard, the

are converted you must strengthen your brothers." One of Luke's characteristics is the emphasis on Jesus' prayers—here on behalf of an endangered Peter. See also Luke 6:12, 13, before Jesus selects his disciples, and 9:28, when Jesus is transfigured. None of the other Gospels explicitly say Jesus prayed on these occasions. The book of Acts, also written by Luke, shows that Jesus' prayers for Peter are answered. Look, for example, at Pentecost and Peter's sermon in Acts 2.

For the expositor of Luke, the prayers of Christ—not Peter's prayer or lack of prayer—turn out to be decisive. While Peter sleeps, Jesus prays. Even more important, Jesus has been praying on Peter's behalf before the crisis, and through these prayers is able to point to a time when Peter will be strong enough to strengthen others! The preacher will go further by linking the ongoing intercession of Jesus announced by Paul in Romans 8:34 with Luke 22:31-32 to provide assurance for the anxious reader: the intercessory prayers of our Savior will bring us through.

John: When Strength Becomes Weakness

In agreement with the Synoptics, John depicts Peter asserting his loyalty to Jesus. Jesus announces that the disciples cannot go where he is going. Peter asks where

Jesus is going, only to be told that he cannot follow Jesus now, but that he will later (John 13:33, 36). Peter responds, "Lord, why can I not follow you right now? I will lay down my life for you" (13:37). This language echoes Jesus' earlier statement, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (10:11).

Jesus challenges Peter's assertion that he will lay down his life for Jesus with the startling prediction that Peter will deny him three times before morning, when the rooster crows (13:38). No further interchange occurs between Jesus and Peter until the resurrected Jesus asks Peter, the backsliding fisherman, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (21:15).¹⁵ Between these two exchanges, Jesus tells the disciples, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (15:12, 13). Jesus' three-fold command to Peter to "Feed my lambs/sheep" acknowledges a shepherding role for Peter. Self-acclaimed as ready to die for Jesus, Peter is now directed toward Jesus' sheep to be tended in Jesus' absence. As with Jesus the shepherd, Peter the shepherd will die also, presumably by crucifixion (21:18-19).

When Jesus is arrested in the Garden he requests that his disciples be allowed to "go their way" (18:8). However, Peter does not leave. Unlike Mark, John presents Peter as a man of immense courage. Only John tells us that it was Peter who whirled his sword alone against the band of armed soldiers who arrested Jesus by torchlight after he had already made provision for his disciples to leave without arrest (18:10). On his own, apart from Jesus' leadership, Peter attempts to take over by a courageous if foolhardy defense. Even after Jesus' rebuke, Peter insists on keeping his word. He "was following Jesus" (v.15) right up to the entrance of the courtyard of the high priest. After being recognized by the slave girl at the entrance, Peter shows up next attempting to mingle incognito around a fire with the very officers he had earlier tackled single-handedly by torchlight (18:18)!

In his commitment to follow Jesus, Peter pursues a nearly suicidal course. So in John's version the first two questions Peter's accusers ask him convey a sense of disbelief that the man who tried to defend Jesus would place himself under the nose of danger. The Greek construction of these questions (*me kaisu . . . ei . . .*) is equivalent to the English construction that implies a

negative answer. "You aren't, . . . are you?" (vv. 17, 25). The wording of the accusations in the other three Gospels' accounts are simple declarations of fact, that is, "You were with him." In the final query in John's account, the accuser is a relative of the man that Peter attempted to kill. The Greek construction in this final accusation is affirmative, unlike the previous two accusations in John. After two tentative, even disbelieving identifications, Peter is confronted by a man who knows who he is.

The expositor seeking to draw out the pastoral elements of the story may note that raw human courage or native talent are not enough to succeed in Peter's crisis. Peter fails in spite of earlier protests to Jesus in chapter 13 that he will stand with him. The reader of John shouldn't be surprised. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus speaks of the need to abide in him as the branches to the tree (15:1-4). Says Jesus: "Apart from me you can do nothing." However, Peter has his own program. He decides to defend Jesus. He decides to stay near Jesus, even when Jesus had arranged with those arresting him that his disciples be allowed to leave untouched. The strength of character and courage that distinguishes Peter from the others proves to be the avenue for his downfall. It must be confessed that these connections made between the teaching of chapter 15 and the narrative of chapter 18 are far less explicit than between those in Mark 13 and 14, as noted earlier.

In addition, in chapter 21 John has a lengthy scene in which Peter is rehabilitated by Jesus' three-fold question/commissioning: Simon, do you love me? . . . feed my sheep/lambs. The three denials are replaced by the three affirmations of Peter's love and Jesus' commands to leadership. John focuses on Christ. Like Peter, the Christian leader succeeds only as his life is hidden in Christ's. Those for whom he cares are not his property, but belong to the Good Shepherd (John 10).

What It Means to Believe in the Bible

By now, it is clear that details of the four accounts differ in the four Gospels. This article shows that in each case at least some of the apparently trivial details



provide evidence for what the writer wants us to learn from Peter's denial. Since each writer stresses a unique aspect, we dare not use one Gospel's account to silence or even correct the others. Within this story so familiar to early Christians were several important lessons to be emphasized. Each writer saw a different aspect of the truth and wrote a version of the story that supported that truth.

We cannot ourselves deny the differences without denying the Scripture as given to us. Furthermore, we cannot definitively adjudicate among the many possible scenarios that can be construed to explain the historical or literary origins of the details. The writers individually drew out what was latent or implicit. I hold that what each writer found in the old story of Peter was indeed part of the truth—the truth about Peter, the truth about Jesus, and the truth about those of us who read these old stories. Let the distinctive message of each stand out! We are richer for having all four versions.¹⁶

Could God have eliminated the differences, the apparently irreconcilable differences? Could God have set the matters straight in defective human memories? For the believer, the answer is yes, of course. But God didn't choose to do that. To insist on absolute verbal inerrancy is to insist that God do it my way or else. We must be careful not to tell God how he must conduct his affairs. Instead, God in his wisdom chose human writers and with their fallible human perspective gave each glimpses of the truth.

Notes and References

1. For a convenient comparison of the four versions and the details unique to John, see Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City; N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970): 836-42. On the construction of Mark's version, see Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 888-91, 920-22. On Matthew's alterations of Mark, see Donald Hagner, "Matthew," *Word Bible Commentary*, vol. 33B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1995), 33B: 803-7. Hagner provides an extensive bibliography of scholarship on the denials of Peter through 1990.
2. For instance, Samuel Korenteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word: The Crisis over Biblical Authority and Biblical Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: The Author, 1996), 282-300, surveys several problem passages in the New Testament but makes no mention of the more difficult one.
3. Though the early Etta Linneman ("Die Verleugnung des Petrus, *Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche*, 63 [1966]: 1-32, and *Studien zur Passionsgeschichte* [FRLANT 102: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970]) followed her mentor, Rudolph Bultmann, in denying the historical truth of the account. More recently Burton Mack (*A Myth of Innocence* [Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1988], 305-6) has dismissed the account. Any denial of a historical basis of the denials is not complete until the story's existence is explained. Brown, *John*, 2:841, observes "some of these complicated

theories about how a fictional story evolved tax one's credibility more than the acceptance of the narrative as based on history."

5. Eusebius, *H.E.* 3:39.15. For a recent discussion of the identity of the elder in this citation see Gundry, *Mark*, 1026-35.
6. This characterizes Koranteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word*, which advocates the seven-fold approach of R. A. Torrey, *Is the Bible the Inerrant Word of God, and Was the Body of Jesus Raised from the Dead?* (New York: George H. Doran, 1922), 66-75, in dealing with apparently insolvable difficulties and contradictions in the Bible.
7. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), 759.
8. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1953), cited in Morris, *Gospel According to John*, 759.
9. Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1976), 174-76. The quotation is taken from page 174.
10. In Mark 5:1, several boats filled with men, including one with Jesus and his disciples, arrive on the shore of the territory of the Garasenes. But from verse 2 onward only Jesus and the demoniac are in view. The disciples are seen again in the narrative in 5:31. Obviously, they have been there all along, but invisible from the narrator's camera.
11. Compare "You also were with Jesus the Galilean" (Matt. 26:69) and "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth" (Matt. 26:71) with the first two accusations in Mark: "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus" (Mark 14: 67) and "This man is one of them" (Mark 14:69).
12. Compare "At last two . . . said, 'This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days''" (Matt. 26:60, 61) with "Some stood up and bore false witness against him saying, 'We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands''" (Mark 14:57, 58).
13. The disciples are not to stop worrying because their lives would be spared when dragged into the presence of rulers, but that they would not misspeak. The security offered is the security of having the Spirit speak through them. The same sayings about witness before rulers can be found in Mark 13:9-11. However, Matthew has transported this eschatological instruction forward into chapter 10, a discourse on evangelism, placed far ahead of his eschatological discourse in chapters 24-25.
14. Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 362.
15. These words of comparison are reminiscent of Peter's assertion in Mark 14:29/Matthew 26:33, that even if all the other disciples fall away, he will not. Is this an instance of what some intended readers/hearers of the Gospel of John were presumed to already know, though not included? See John 21:25 for the acknowledgment that what was left out was much greater than what was included.
16. Speaking for myself, I have been attracted to the work of Kenneth Bailey, known for his ethnographical and literary treatment of the parables of Jesus. Less widely known is "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *Asian Journal of Theology* 5.1(1991): 32-54. Bailey draws on his own extensive thirty years of observation in the Middle East. He distinguishes between literary material transmitted with inflexible accuracy, that is, poetry and proverbs by designated teachers or reciters, on the one hand, and the more flexible transmission of parables and recollections of historical events by the whole village, on the other. Bailey suggests that the early believers transmitted the gospel narrative in a manner similar to that of these villages.

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