Peter’s Denial


At the same time the tragic drama of the Savior’s inquisition unfolded inside the palace of the high priest, another drama was being played out outside the palace. There the apostle Peter endured an inquisition of his own.

When the other disciples fled as Jesus was being arrested, Peter followed his Master and the arresting party “afar off unto the high priest’s palace” (Mt 26:58). This palace seems to have housed the residences of both Caiaphas and Annas, before whom Jesus was arraigned first. In keeping with his presentation of unique details, John adds that Peter “followed Jesus, and so did another disciple” who “was known unto the high priest.” This disciple went into the palace with Jesus and eventually “spake unto her that kept the door, and brought in Peter” (Jn 18:15–16). It is not known who this other disciple was, but some scholars have suggested it was John himself.

Given that Matthew and Mark clearly state that at some point Peter “sat without in the palace” (Mt 26:69), or “Peter was beneath in the palace” (Mk 14:66), it is likely that Peter was first admitted to Jesus’ arraignment before Annas and later sat out in the courtyard while his Master’s next hearing, before Caiaphas, took place in another part of the palace complex. This surmise accords well with the archaeological evidence of a courtyard set down the hill below the main palace complex.

The traditional, and probably accurate, location of the high priest’s palace is high above the Hinnom Valley on the western hill of Jerusalem, then inside the city walls, and later known as Mount Zion. A fourth-century traveler to Jerusalem, nicknamed the Pilgrim of Bordeaux, said: “In the same valley of Siloam you go up to Mount Sion and you see the site where the house of Caiaphas stood” (St. Peter “in Gallicantu,” 2). In the fifth century after Christ, a church was built on this site, and the Crusaders later named it Gallicantu, “the cock-crow.” In modern times, a dungeon, scouring room, courtyard, artifacts, and a Hebrew inscription have been unearthed on the site that are consistent with expectations associated with the residence and judicial functions of the high priest.

Accusations

As Peter sat beside a fire in the palace courtyard, awaiting word regarding the ultimate fate of Jesus, one of the servants of the high priest’s household approached him. Mark’s account of the scene is similar to that of the other Synoptic Gospels:

And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked upon him, and said, And thou also wast with Jesus of Nazareth.

But he denied, saying, I know not, neither understand [49] I what thou sayest. And he went out into the porch; and the cock crew.

And a maid saw him again, and began to say to them that stood by, This is one of them.

And he denied it again. And a little after, they that stood by said again to Peter, Surely thou art one of them: for thou art a Galilean, and thy speech agreeth thereto.

But he began to curse and to swear, saying, I know not this man of whom ye speak.

And the second time the cock crew. And Peter called to mind the word that Jesus said unto him, Before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice. And when he thought thereon, he wept. (Mk 14:67–72)

John’s account, though shorter, adds an interesting detail:

One of the servants of the high priest, being his kinsman whose ear Peter cut off, said, Did not I see thee in the garden with him? Peter then denied again: and immediately the cock crew. (Jn 18:26–27)

Apparently, this kinsman was an eyewitness both to Peter’s attack on his relative, Malchus, and to Peter’s intimate association with Jesus in the garden.

To fully appreciate the significance of the exchange between Peter and his accusers, we need to go back to events of the Last Supper several hours before. In the upper room the Savior described to his apostles their reaction to events that were about to burst forth upon them: “All ye shall be offended because of me this night.” Peter protested, “Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended” (Mt 26:71, 33). [50]

Jesus’ specific response to Peter teaches us profound lessons, especially in light of the confidence Jesus had in Peter’s faithfulness and the potential he knew Peter possessed: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Lk 22:31–32).

The thought that any prayer offered by the Savior would not come to pass, nor any prediction of his not be fulfilled, is unthinkable. Peter’s faith would not fail, though he had a deeper conversion yet to experience. The texts of all four Gospels indicate that even up to that point, Peter still did not fully comprehend the earth-shaking events soon to overtake the Savior and the early Church. Again the Savior patiently tried to teach Peter of things that must shortly come to pass:
Simon Peter said unto him, Lord, whither goest thou? Jesus answered him, Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards.

Peter saith unto him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake.

Jesus answered him, Wilt thou lay down thy life for my sake? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied me thrice. (Jn 13:36–38)

Peter was never one to shrink from danger, and we cannot doubt that at the moment, and all the moments before it and after it, Peter would have forfeited his life for his Master’s. But that was precisely the problem. Peter might recklessly have laid down his life for Jesus when something different was needed and intended by the Savior. [51]

After the Last Supper concluded, events moved along unalterably as the apostles followed Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane. When the Savior finished praying the same prayer for the third time, the police force of the Jerusalem Temple appeared, ready to arrest Jesus. Peter drew his sword and became embroiled in the events we have already discussed. It [is] important to remember that Peter’s selfless act of protection was done in the face of an armed mob who could have easily overwhelmed the chief apostle. That action is in complete harmony with everything else we know about Peter. Even when all the other disciples fled at Jesus’ arrest, Peter followed afar off and ended up confronting the two women and the man who accused him of associating with Jesus.

What gives us pause at the point is consideration of Peter’s motivation for denying that he knew his Master. Why did he deny Him? The reasons usually given range from fear of personal harm, to weakness, to embarrassment, to pride, to indecision, or to some other flaw or weakness in Peter’s character. Yet these reasons seem to contradict everything else we have read about the chief apostle in the New Testament, including his bold, unequivocal confession of the Savior’s Sonship at Caesarea Philippi, when a diverse set of opinions regarding Jesus was floating about the land, and his faithful obedience and placed all worldly goods on the altar for the cause….

As I read this, I had some strange emotions. I was shocked, then I was chilled, then my blood changed its nature and began to boil. I felt I was attacked viciously, for Peter was my brother, my colleague, my example, my prophet, and God’s anointed. I whispered [53] to myself, “That is not true. He is maligning my brother.” (Peter, My Brother, 488)

President Kimball discussed the tremendous strength, power, faithfulness, and other apostolic attributes of Peter, including his boldness. Then he said:

Much of the criticism of Simon Peter is centered in his denial of his acquaintance with the Master. This has been labeled “cowardice.” Are we sure of his motive in that recorded denial? He had already given up his occupation and placed all worldly goods on the altar for the cause….

Is it conceivable that the omniscient Lord would give all these powers and keys to one who was a failure or unworthy?…

If Peter was frightened in the court when he denied his association with the Lord, how brave he was hours earlier when he drew his sword against an overpowering enemy, the night mob. Later defying the people and state and church officials, he boldly charged, “Him [the Christ] … ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.” (Acts 2:23.) To the astounded populace at the healing of the cripple at the Gate Beautiful, he exclaimed, “Ye men of Israel … the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate. … ye denied the Holy One…. And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised up from the dead; whereof we are witnesses.” (Acts 3:12–15.)

Does this portray cowardice? Quite a bold assertion for a
timid one. Remember that Peter never denied the [54] divinity of Christ. He only denied his association or acquaintance with the Christ, which is quite a different matter.…

Is it possible that there might have been some other reason for Peter’s triple denial? Could he have felt that circumstances justified expediency? When he bore a strong testimony in Caesarea Philippi, he had been told that “they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.” (Mt 16:20.) (Peter, My Brother, 488–89)

To what, then, might we attribute Peter’s denial? Perhaps it could be attributed to Jesus himself—to a request or command he made that Peter should deny knowing him, not to deny his divinity but to deny knowing him as the religious rebel the Jewish leaders saw him to be. Why? To ensure Peter’s safety as chief apostle and to ensure the continuity and safety of the Quorum of the Twelve.

Some may object that God would never command any of his children to do such a thing, but we do not know all that God knows, nor do we know all that went on in this situation. Moreover, we find interesting contradictions, or seeming contradictions, in other scriptural passages that put this episode in a different light. For example, God commanded Abraham that his wife, Sarah, should tell the Egyptians that she was Abraham’s sister so that he would be protected, just as Jesus wanted the apostles protected (Abr 2:23–25). We also remember Deity commanding Nephi to slay Laban in order to keep a whole nation safe spiritually and to bring forth God’s righteous purposes (1 Ne 4:13). The Prophet Joseph Smith taught:

But we cannot keep all the commandments without [55] first knowing them, and we cannot expect to know all, or more than we now know unless we comply with or keep those we have already received. That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another.

God said, “Thou shalt not kill”; at another time He said, “Thou shalt utterly destroy.” This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire. If we seek first the kingdom of God, all good things will be added. So with Solomon: first he asked wisdom, and God gave it him, and with it every desire of his heart, even things which might be considered abominable to all who understand the order of heaven only in part, but which in reality were right because God gave and sanctioned by special revelation. (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 256)

Remember, by the time of his arrest, Jesus was protective of his apostles, and the safety of the Quorum had become a major concern for him. As we have indicated, in his great high priestly prayer, the Savior prayed for the safety of the apostles. “I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil” (Jn 17:15). When he was arrested in the garden, he said to the mob, “I have told you that I am he: if therefore ye seek me, let these go their way” (Jn 18:8). Jesus did not want anything to happen to those who were ordained to take over the earthly leadership of the [56] Church. He had already averted wholesale slaughter in Gethsemane when first, in the upper room, he restricted to two the number of swords carried by the apostles (Lk 22:38). Later, while being arrested, he told Peter to put away his sword, “for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword” (Mt 26:52). It will be remembered that some of the apostles asked, “Lord, shall we strike with the sword?” (Lk 22:49) while Peter went ahead and lopped off Malchus’s ear without waiting for an answer.

Jesus had told Peter at the Last Supper that He had prayed that Peter’s faith would not fail—and it did not. As President Kimball stated: “Peter was under fire; all the hosts of hell were against him. The die had been cast for the Savior’s crucifixion. If Satan could destroy Simon now, what a victory he would score. Here was the greatest of all living men. Lucifer wanted to confuse him, frustrate him, limit his prestige, and totally destroy him. However, this was not to be, for he was chosen and ordained to a high purpose in heaven, as was Abraham” (Peter, My Brother, 488–89; emphasis added).

Matthew tells us that Peter went to the high priest’s palace “to see the end” (Mt 26:58). The implication is that Peter went as a witness of the last events associated with the life of the mortal Messiah. Had Peter been inclined to cowardice, it seems likely he would not have gone to the palace and put himself in harm’s way. How grateful we are to have had Peter there as an eyewitness of that part of the atoning sacrifice.

In sum, it is apparent that Jesus knew of Peter’s fearlessness in defending him. He had seen several manifestations of Peter’s unswerving, almost reckless, commitment to prevent any physical harm to the Savior. And this was something Jesus knew could get Peter into trouble if it were not tempered. It would [57] put the chief apostle in grave physical danger. Therefore, it is possible that when Jesus told Peter he would deny him thrice before the cock crowed twice, it was not a prediction—it was a command. This is, in fact, a possible reading of the Synoptic texts, according to the grammatical rules of Koine Greek, which is the language in which early manuscripts of the New Testament were written. In their accounts of this episode, Matthew (26:34, 75), Mark (14:30, 72), and Luke (22:34, 61) all use the same verb and verb form, aparnese, which can be read either as an indicative future tense or as an imperative (command) tense. One Latter-day Saint scholar of classical languages arrived at the following conclusion:
When the Lord had informed the eleven who remained with Him to finish the Last Supper that they would soon be scattered, Peter protested that he would never abandon the Savior, but sooner go to his death. Tradition portrays Christ as then prophesying of the three-time denial of Peter to come that very night (Mt 26:31–35; Mk 14:27–31; Lk 22:31–34; Jn 13:36–38). However, close examination of the original Greek of John’s account (Jn 13:38) reveals that the phrase “till thou hast denied me thrice” is structured around the verb … [arnese], a second person singular future indicative verb form. Virtually the same verb … [aparnese], in the same second person singular future indicative form, appears in Matthew (26:34), Mark (14:30), and Luke (22:34).

Although the tense is future, and may accurately be construed as indicating a prediction or prophecy of Peter’s future behavior, it is possible that such a rendering is not at all the [58] meaning of Christ’s statement. In Greek, a future tense verb in the second person can also be construed to express a command, just as it if were an imperative form of the verb. This usage is given the grammatical term of the “jussive future.” It occurs not infrequently in both classical and koine Greek. Accordingly, if the future in these passages is interpreted as a jussive future, then Christ would seem actually to be giving Peter a command to deny knowing Him, and Peter’s protestation would seem to reflect his dissatisfaction about such an instruction. This rendering appears very much in keeping with Peter’s natural courage. Restriction would test Peter’s faith so much more, for he was being refused permission to expose himself to the tribulations that Christ must undertake alone….

When Christ was taken, instead of acting impulsively, Peter did demonstrate great restraint both in not trying to interfere in the process of Jesus’ death and in protecting himself that he might live to fulfill his mission. How he must have wanted to wield his sword and free the Savior! How he must have desired to proclaim Jesus as the Christ to those assembled in the courtyard! Although Peter never denied the divinity of Christ, he must have been in tremendous turmoil not to be able to admit to his friendship with Jesus, and could even have felt as if this practically constituted a denial of his friend. Each time Peter was questioned as to his association with Jesus and compelled to deny it, seemingly contradicting his own pledge of loyalty unto death, what faith was put into the charge Christ had given him for the future! Peter was neither impetuous, nor did he lack [59] faith. Quite the opposite. The man who had fearlessly struck with his sword at Gethsemane, was the same man who evidenced fearless and faithful restraint in the courtyard of the high priest. John’s telling of the account shows Peter’s faith, not his fear. (Hall, New Testament Witnesses of Christ, 65–66)

Some might ask, “Why then did Peter weep bitterly after his denial?” Isn’t it possible that those were tears of frustration and bitter sorrow in the realization that he was powerless to change the Lord’s fate? He had done what needed to be done, but every impulse inside him was to act differently—to prevent the suffering of the Savior. That must have been a bitter pill for Peter to swallow. He wept tears of frustration precisely because he was obedient and also because he was fully aware that he was going to lose his Master to the inevitability of death. In my view, Peter’s denial, far from detracting from his stature, greatly adds to it. How grateful we are to a modern prophet and apostle, Spencer W. Kimball, for helping us to look at events in the New Testament differently with the aid of prophetic interpretation.
The same principle holds true in English, before the last half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century:

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<tr>
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<th>Singular</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Future Indicative; predicive; simple future.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>First Person</strong></td>
<td>I shall</td>
<td>We shall</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Second Person</strong></td>
<td>You will</td>
<td>You (all) will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third Person</strong></td>
<td>He/she/it will</td>
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|                           |                |                |
| **Future Imperative; command** |                |                |
| **First Person**          | I will         | We will        |
| **Second Person**         | You shall      | You (all) shall|
| **Third Person**          | He/she/it shall| They shall     |

Mt 26:34, 75 — “shalt” — command; imperative, not indicative  
Mk 14:30, 72 — “shalt” — command; imperative, not indicative  
Lk 22:34, 61 — “shalt” — command; imperative, not indicative

(See any comprehensive English usage book for verification, e.g. Fowler’s; *Usage and Abusage*; etc.)