

## Martyrdom of Peter

Christian tradition holds that Peter was martyred in Rome under the emperor Nero, that he was put to death by crucifixion, and, specifically, that he was crucified upside down.

The Gospel of John records a prediction by Jesus concerning “the kind of death” by which Peter would glorify God: “When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go” (21:18–19). The reference to outstretched hands seems like an allusion to crucifixion (though not, actually, to upside-down crucifixion).

Around the year 96, the bishop Clement writes from Rome, “Because of jealousy and envy the greatest and most upright pillars were persecuted, and they struggled in the contest even to death. . . . Peter bore up under hardships not just once or twice, but many times; and having thus borne his witness he went to the place of glory that he deserved” (1 *Clement* 5:2–4).<sup>\*</sup> About one hundred years later, Tertullian states that Nero was the one responsible for the apostles’ deaths (*Antidote for the Scorpion’s Sting* 15). He refers to Rome as a fortunate church “where Peter endures a passion like his Lord’s! where Paul wins his crown in a death like John’s!” (*Prescription against Heretics* 36).<sup>†</sup> The reference to Peter having “a passion like his Lord’s” probably refers, again, to crucifixion (Paul’s death was like that of John the Baptist, because he was beheaded).

The idea that Peter was crucified upside down actually comes from the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, a fanciful second-century work that usually is given little credibility by religious scholars. In this case, however, the work devotes several paragraphs to explaining why Peter was crucified in this manner: Peter himself requested it because it would convey an elaborate and esoteric symbolism likening his death to a birth process, with imagery supposedly recalling Adam. This all seems way too complicated and not at all persuasive—but that simply begs the question of what the author of this work hoped to gain by such far-fetched explanations. Many scholars surmise that the author never would have brought the matter up at all unless there was something that needed to be explained.

Elsewhere, the Roman historian Josephus does note that soldiers sometimes amused themselves by crucifying criminals in different positions as a means of furthering their humiliation. Thus it is possible that the *Acts of Peter* did not invent this detail about Peter’s death but rather tried (somewhat desperately) to supply theological reasons for something that many Christians knew and found traumatic. Thus the upside-down crucifixion of Peter might be regarded as an actual historical event that went unmentioned in earlier sources whose authors hoped that the detail could be forgotten.

<sup>\*</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>†</sup>*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, 10 vols., (1885–96; Repr., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986–89), 3:260.