

PETER'S PREDICAMENT: GRACE TO THE GENTILES

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LEVEL I:

Focus

This is a group case study done for Dr. Witherington's NT520 Intro to New Testament class. This case study focuses on Simon Peter, an observant Jew and a disciple of Jesus Christ, as well as Cornelius, a Gentile centurion in the Roman army, both living in first-century Palestine. Cornelius was not a believer in Jesus Christ but he was seeking God, and he was reverent and generous.

According to Jewish Law, certain foods were forbidden to be eaten in accordance with Leviticus chapter 11. These food laws made it difficult for Jews to eat with Gentiles without risking defilement. In fact, the Gentiles themselves were often seen as unclean and an observant Jew would avoid being in the home of a Gentile to prevent the risk of being defiled. Defilement would subject a Jew to being cast out of active roles in Jewish society, or at the very least, temporarily limit their involvement.

We imagined the conflict that must have taken place within Peter as to the possible outcomes and ramifications of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. We also hypothesized the reaction on the part of Cornelius and his family.

Background

The Roman Empire divided the land of Israel into three separate regions: Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. The Roman Empire established Herod the Great as the puppet king to rule over the Jews in this area.

Under Herod the Great, the economy of Galilee developed rapidly. Under his son Herod Antipas, lower Galilee developed rapidly in terms of building and developments. Also, there was Romanization of parts of the region. As a whole, Galilee offered agricultural products and was developing a small market economy with the principle of limited good affecting supply and demand. Galilee was also a chief supplier of grain to many of the regional markets. It also supplied both itself and parts of Phoenicia with olives and olive oil. Furthermore, Galilee was famous for the type of fish known as *coracin* that could be cured with salt, allowing it to be exported over considerable distances without spoiling. There was also another fish, popular in Rome, called *garum* that was shipped in two-handled jars known as *amphorae*. Needless to say, fishing was the principal business in Galilee. As such, many subsidiary businesses were dependent on the success of this industry.

As a fisherman, Peter had to be well versed in Aramaic and Greek. Aramaic was the common tongue of the Jewish people, though Hebrew was their traditional language. In order to conduct business, it was necessary for him to know Greek, as this was the language of the ruling populace¹. Peter and Jesus were each raised in their respective parts of Galilee by Jewish families. Since their families were observant Jews, Peter and Jesus were circumcised on the eighth day after their births and then dedicated in the temple. Peter and Jesus were taught to recite the Shema, the creed of early Judaism found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Also, they were thoroughly grounded in the laws of the nation, memorizing and repeating them regularly.

Despite being tradesmen, as children of observant Jews, they had opportunity to go to various festivals and learn much through observation and participation². However, there is no evidence that Peter and Jesus knew each other in their respective childhoods since they grew up in different parts of Galilee. Also, Peter grew up to be a fisherman while Jesus was trained in the craft of carpentry. As a matter of fact, Peter's first contact comes after Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan.

It was only after God had commissioned Jesus to begin his public ministry that he sought out his disciples. Jesus did not return to Galilee to proclaim the gospel until after John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod Antipas. "As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Peter and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. Come follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men. At once, they left their nets and followed him," (Mark 1:9-18). Later Jesus calls ten more persons to follow him and designates the twelve as his apostles and gives them authority (Mark 1:19-20, 2:13-14, 3:13-19).

At this juncture, Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter (Greek: *Cephas*) and appoints Peter the rock of his church (Mark 3:16). Peter was the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah even though he later disowned Jesus at the time of Jesus' trial and death. After Jesus was resurrected by God, Peter repented; preached a sermon at Pentecost and was the leader of the Jerusalem Church (Mark 8:29, 14:66-72, 16:1-20; Acts 2:14-41, 4:8-6:7). Jesus ascended into heaven right before the eyes of Peter and the remaining ten apostles after Jesus commissioned them: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned," (Mark 16:15-16).

Cornelius was a military leader who worked his way up through the Roman army to the rank of centurion, comparable to a captain in the U.S. Army. He commanded a regiment of Roman soldiers, one-tenth of a legion (6000 men). He was a man of influence in a prominent city, a Gentile soldier serving a powerful nation of Gentiles. Caesarea experienced significant friction between that majority and the minority Jewish population.³

¹ Witherington, *New Testament History*, pp. 113-114, 179-183

² Witherington, pp. 89-92, 117

³ Gangel, Kenneth, *Holman New Testament Commentary*, pp. 158, 193

Though he was one of many, Cornelius was no ordinary soldier. He was a deeply religious God-fearer who performed two out of three Jewish acts of piety – prayer and giving of alms. He was appointed to a very sophisticated post in a city committee supporting cultural activity and the arts. He embraced the Jewish faith and supported the Jewish community. Not only that, but his entire family and all his household servants were monotheistic, worshipping only God. Cornelius sent three people to Joppa, two servants and a military orderly. They went with the intent of seeking out Peter.⁴

Description

Cornelius and his family were devout and God-fearing Gentiles. He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. During one of his afternoon prayers, Cornelius had a vision of one of God's angels. The angel instructed Cornelius to send men to Joppa to bring Peter. After the angel departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He explained everything to them and sent them to bring Peter (Acts 10:1-8).

“About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up to the roof to pray. He became hungry and saw something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ Peter refused and said ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’ The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven,” (Acts 10:9-16).

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the Spirit informed Peter about the three men. Further, the Spirit instructs Peter to go with them and states that they are sent of God. Peter went and conversed with these men, and they explained everything that Cornelius had said to them.

LEVEL II:

Analysis

Three men arrived at the house of Simon the Tanner in Joppa, where Peter was staying. Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian cohort, had sent them in order to ask Peter to come to his house and preach. Peter had been on the roof when they arrived, contemplating his vision. Peter may not have yet reached a conclusion as to the meaning behind the vision, and may have needed more time to think about it. Or it may have been that it was late in the evening and perhaps too late to begin the journey back to Caesarea where Cornelius lived. Taking this into consideration, Peter invited the three to spend the night. He had taken his first step towards reaching out to the Gentiles by inviting those he normally would have deemed unclean to stay in his very house.

⁴ Gangel, Kenneth, *Holman New Testament Commentary*, p. 159

Peter had been in Joppa for some time during a period of peace for the church and the number of believers was growing. Joppa was a major seaport in the region, home to fishermen and merchants, among whom Peter felt at home. Peter had raised Tabitha from the dead in this town, and was consequently loved and appreciated. Yet, his time of comfort had come to an end. God had given Peter the vision concerning clean and unclean foods. Now he was forced to make a decision, either go to this unclean Gentile or remain in the familiarity of Joppa among the familiarity of his own people. So, after sleeping on it for a night in Joppa, Peter accompanied the traveling party to Caesarea.

When Peter arrived at the house of Cornelius, he revealed that he had interpreted the vision of clean and unclean food as referring to people and their state of ritual cleanliness. His interpretation was in contrast to how Jews viewed the animals and people of the times. In the Jewish community, there were two criteria by which they judged the clean and unclean: 1. Being a member of the Israelite community by birth or induction, 2. The ability to pass on ancestral covenantal status through offspring. Animals also had to conform to two criteria: 1. Domesticated and cud chewing, 2. Parted hoofs.⁵ Those that were deemed acceptable were allowed within the proximity of the Temple.

Peter's vision included reptiles, an especially unclean animal according to the ritual laws in Leviticus 11. As God had commanded Peter not to call any animal unclean, Peter concluded that he could not consider any person to be unclean, if God had cleansed them.

It would have been difficult for Peter to be unbiased toward a Roman soldier. He knew that Roman soldiers had flogged, beat, mocked, and finally crucified his Savior. This vision would not have been easy to accept, and Peter no doubt felt a little uneasy ministering to Roman Gentiles, especially those with military affiliations.

In making his decision to go to Cornelius, Peter perhaps remembered the words he shared with Jesus, contained in John 21:18, "Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But 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." Certainly Peter must have felt that he was roped into this assignment. The term "stretch out your hands" was an early church euphemism for crucifixion, the rest of the conversation was about the disciple whom Jesus loved and the topic was death. Peter would have picked up this hidden meaning. Jesus seemed to rebuke Peter, telling him not to be concerned with others, but to follow him only. Peter did not want to leave Joppa, and was being led to a place he would not normally want to go. He may have considered that this decision could lead to crucifixion, should his radical preaching upset the Roman authorities. Nevertheless, he had already resolved to give his life for the Lord. He was not about to make a fourth denial.

Peter knew what he was about to do and the possible controversy that would arise. Hearing Peter's preaching, many of the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit and were baptized. In order to soften the impact of his actions with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, Peter had witnesses to substantiate his story. Those living near the Temple

⁵ Malina, *The New Testament World*, pp. 176-178

heart of Judaism tended to be the most legalistic, and he was probably more than a little concerned how they might view this venture into ministry with the Gentiles.

Integration

As stated in the initial focus section, the main issue at hand is the outcome of Peter having preached the gospel to Cornelius and his family. Peter was a devout Jew who received a vision commanding him to eat unclean foods, and from this, he derived the command to go and preach to the Roman centurion. We have already considered some of the thoughts that could have been running through Peter's mind, but given his first century Jewish context there are several other perspectives that could have formed his decision. Among these would be the generally dyadic social views of the first century Mediterranean world and the philosophies of some of the various Jewish schools: Sadducee, Pharisee, and Essene.

We must begin by asserting how radically the message of the Gospel changed things for the followers of Christ. Even in its early stages, it directly challenged many of the dyadic presuppositions of the day. However, we must consider the influence that these presuppositions undoubtedly still had on Peter and his decision. This dyadic perspective⁶ saw the individual personality as defined by the individual's social group: personality did not encounter change, and with communal emphasis on honor, that personality was seen as dangerous if it deviated from the established norm of the group. It was therefore the duty of the group to keep its individuals in line, lest an attempt by an individual to go outside the bounds of the group result in shame for all concerned. Therefore, from this perspective, Peter would have had to consider how his actions would affect the established group of Jewish Christians. What would it mean to preach the gospel to Gentiles? If Peter chose to expand the group to include Cornelius and his family of his own volition, would this be seen as deviation from the dyadic norm?

It is difficult to be certain how the Sadducee school of thought might have informed Peter. The Sadducees catered to the elite in Jewish society, presumably drawing the bulk of their support from the Zadokite priesthood. In fact, they appear to have had little support among the people, and in the time of Peter, they were forced to tolerate the decisions of the more popular Pharisees in several instances. They were strict in their judgments and they adhered closely to the Law of Moses. They disagreed with the Pharisees, who had also followed the accumulated teachings interpreting the Law.⁷ The Sadducees' rejection of the continuation of the soul after death⁸ and their suspicion of such spiritual things as developed angelology (Acts 23:8) may have led them to question the validity of Peter's vision, especially given its content. Furthermore, a reference in the Mishnah⁹ to some of the disagreements between the Sadducees and the Pharisees shows that both groups were extremely concerned with maintaining the ritual purity of the Law, and as such, it is

⁶ Malina, chapter 2

⁷ VanderKam, *An Introduction to Early Judaism*, pp. 189

⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.165

⁹ Yadaim 4.6-7

difficult to conceive that the Sadduceean philosophy would approve of Peter following the dictates of his vision.

Like the Sadducees, the Pharisees held a strict interpretation of the Law of Moses – Josephus says that they were the most accurate interpreters of the Law¹⁰ - but they differed from the more elite group in several ways. For example, they held much more sway with the Jewish populace, and they believed in angels, spirits, and the immortality of the soul. Furthermore, they included traditional interpretations of the Law in their teachings, as shown in the Pharisaical influence on the Mishnah.¹¹ From this collection of later traditions we can glean an understanding of how the Pharisees would have viewed Peter's situation.

Throughout the Mishnah, it is permitted for Jews to enter into business relations with Gentiles, but there are restrictions place upon such transactions. In *Abodah Zarah* it is forbidden to do business with Gentiles during the time of their pagan festivals, and indeed, during these festivals Jews should even avoid traveling on roads that lead only to Gentile cities. In *Shabbath*, Jews are not allowed to use Gentiles for work on the Sabbath, indicating that though the Gentiles are not under the Law, the Jews must not consider this a legal loophole. Gentiles are restricted from certain Jewish functions: it is not acceptable for them to pay the half-shekel tax (*Shekalim* 1:5), their testimony regarding a man's death is not valid evidence (*Yebamoth* 16:5), they cannot take the Nazarite vow (*Nazir* 9:1), they cannot perform the laying of hands on a sacrifice (*Menahoth* 9:8), nor are they clean enough to enter the rampart of the temple (*Kelim* 1:8). Regarding food, *Berakoth* 7:1 excludes Gentiles from the common grace said before meals, *Hullin* 1:1 says that food killed by a Gentile is carrion, and Rabbi Gamaliel says that he would not accept even a fish from a Gentile (*Betzah* 3:2). More examples could be cited, but the general tenor is that while association with Gentiles is far from forbidden, Pharisaical purity demands that the unclean Gentiles be held at arm's length. Hence, it seems quite clear that the school of the Pharisees would have viewed Peter's vision and his mission with severe disapproval.

Perhaps the strictest philosophy that could have influenced Peter would have been that of the Essenes. Indeed, they appear to have considered the Pharisees "those who seek smooth things," commenting on their relative leniency. The Essenes had the strictest views of the Sabbath and the strictest daily regimen in their predominantly communal lifestyle.¹² They were concerned with purity to the point of withdrawal from the world, especially in the case of the (presumably) Essene community at Qumran. Philo portrays them as avoiding cities as much as possible, lest the wickedness therein infect them.¹³ According to Josephus, even junior members of the community were considered unclean to the point that a senior member would have to wash himself if a junior member touched

¹⁰ Josephus, 2.162

¹¹ VanderKam, pp. 187-189

¹² VanderKam, pp. 191

¹³ Philo, *Every Good Man is Free*, 76; Josephus seems to disagree with him though, when he says that the Essenes dwell in every city (*Jewish Wars* 2.124).

him.¹⁴ The Community Rule of Qumran makes a very clear segregation between the sons of light (i.e. the Qumranites) and the sons of wickedness, and there could be no mixing between them. There had to be a separation from all persons of sinfulness. It is true that the Community Rule says that sin is atoned through uprightness and humility in 3:8 – something that is fairly compatible with Christianity – but a person can only be a part of the Essene community so long as he or she follows the rigid dictates of that community. The Essenes were especially concerned with the purity of their food. In Community Rule 6, an Essene initiate could only touch the communal food after he had been in the community for two full years, and many of the punishments for sin involved exclusion from the common meal. Their food rules were followed so strictly that those who were cast out of the community often nearly starved because they had taken oaths not to eat anything but the communal food of the Essenes, from which they were banned.¹⁵ Furthermore, Philo implies that there was a pacifist streak to the Essene philosophy,¹⁶ which may indicate that they would have been disgusted by consorting with a Roman centurion. This coupled with their extreme views on purity makes it clear that the Essenes would have been appalled at the possibility of Peter considering Cornelius clean without the centurion's adherence to any ritual.

What all of this indicates is that many of the prevailing philosophies and theologies in Judea and Galilee would have strongly disapproved of Peter making the trip to Cornelius' house in Caesarea. Such an interaction between a Jewish fisherman and a Gentile centurion would have directly contradicted the social, political, and religious norms of the day.

LEVEL III:

Judgment

Jesus Christ died for every soul on this earth. We are commissioned to reach every individual despite their ethnic or national background. It is important to understand our biases before we involve ourselves in any kind of cross-cultural ministry. Peter was aware of his biases as a Jew. He knew he was a product of his culture. He was not comfortable with the eating of so-called unclean food. This was his struggle, but with the grace of God, he overcame this problem.

Our research shows that the strong influence of social prejudice was the major hindrance for evangelism. Peter took a bold stand and decided to speak to Cornelius. He may not have identified with him as a Gentile, but he respected his culture. This is most important thing in cross-cultural witnessing; to do everything possible to show that you care. In this case we saw that Peter decided to obey the Lord. We learn that it is easy for all of us to approach those who look like us, speak same language, and have the same cultural background. This story shows that when God calls someone to be a witness, he has also

¹⁴ Josephus, 2.150

¹⁵ Josephus, 2.143

¹⁶ Philo, pp. 78

been working on the hearts of those who will receive the message. God wants us all to be responsible, whether that be in sowing or reaping.

The research shows that eating together was a sign of fellowship and equality. Ancient communities would not eat with some one who was different from them. In many ways, it was challenge for Peter to eat at Cornelius' house. The underlying message is clear. We are all equal in the sight of God, and as such should be willing to sup with everyone, in order that all may hear the good news.

Evaluation

Peter did a good job of listening to God and obeying Him completely. It was probably difficult for him as a fisherman from Galilee to meet with a God-fearing Roman named Cornelius. The existing social traditions, pressure from people, and his own internal struggle were three things holding him back. The early Christian Social Tradition expected non-Jewish people to be circumcised before they could accept Christianity. When we understand the Greco-Roman culture, and the social standing of Christians in that culture, we understand that was the biggest obstacle for reaching them.

The pressure from the early church was so great that it was difficult for Peter to make a decision. In Acts 10:9-15, we read of Peter's own struggle with eating unclean food. He told God that he has not eaten unclean food before (though he had eaten with Gentiles, as Paul mentions in Galatians), but God wanted him to start something new and revolutionary. He was to internalize association with Gentiles, not merely tolerate them.

Peter was initially confused about his vision, but began to understand when he met the men sent by Cornelius. He decided to obey the Lord and invited Cornelius' men into his house for the night. Throughout this story, we see that Peter acted as a responsible agent of God. He prayed about his visions and actions and made the decision not to reject Cornelius. Although he did not make any kind of immediate decision, which would have offended Cornelius or the other Christians, he made a courageous and bold decision about the events that would follow.

In the Bible, we see that Peter is one who rises to the challenge. He is an emotional person, passionate about Christ. This time, he took a risk and decided to go against the prevailing assumptions to spread the Gospel. It was for this willingness that Peter was chosen for this historic act of reaching Gentiles, and he worked closely with God through the Spirit to perform this task.

Fear of breaking tradition, as well as our own biases and prejudices, have the potential to keep us from what God wants us to do. The choice to follow God is difficult because it can affect our earthly securities. The choices we make also have the potential to be life changing for many generations within and beyond the family of faith.

Decision

Peter may have been thinking of how God punished Jonah for not obeying his command and preaching to those he despised. It is probably a safe assumption that he knew of this story, as he was familiar with the teachings of the Jewish traditions. This time though, the message was not that of repentance, but of the good news of salvation. He would have probably felt compelled while at the same time a little hesitant, knowing full well that denying God would not be to his benefit.

Faced with a vision from God, and the aforementioned story of Jonah, Peter did not have any other option but to go and preach the Gospel to Cornelius. Granted, he could have tried to run, but with the knowledge that he had previously failed Jesus by denying him three times in Luke 22:54-62, combined with Jonah's story, he likely went determinedly to the home of the Gentile.

The options this action opened for the future were truly limitless. With God's call to include the Gentiles in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), Peter and the others are now faced with a bigger task than they could have ever imagined. Unfortunately, as will be seen later in Acts, the new call brought new problems, namely as to whether or not the Gentiles had to observe all the Jewish laws, or if they could be followers of Christ apart from them.

The most obvious gap in theory is that we have very little in the way of knowing Peter's state of mind, or his internal struggles. We can only hypothesize as to what he was thinking. We do not view culture in the same way he did, so we are left with a lot of theory, guided by anthropologists and their work on the people of antiquity. Further, our view is clouded by the fact that we are Gentiles ourselves, and do not truly understand all that went into the Jewish laws and observances. We, as Cornelius and his family, are the ones indebted to God's vision and Peter's inner desire to honor God, so we are predisposed to think highly of Peter. However, because Peter could overcome his biases to honor God, I pray that we have done likewise in our evaluations of Peter and his work.