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# **Ambiguity in the Apostle Peter's attitude towards Jesus? An Evangelists' Perspective**

**Thesis  
Summary**

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**Keywords:** Apostle Peter, Apostolate, faith, doubt, ambiguity, impulsiveness, misunderstanding, denial, bitter weeping, confession of love, martyrdom.

## **Introduction**

Saint Peter the Apostle is a prominent figure in the New Testament, standing out among the Twelve Apostles. From the very beginning of the Gospels, we find Peter engaged in a continuous struggle with himself, reflecting the ambiguous nature of his personality. Throughout his discipleship with Christ, the Apostle's life oscillates between two peaks: one of doubt (acting before thinking) and one of professed faith expressed in various forms (such as the Confession of Faith in Caesarea Philippi - Matt. 16:13-20; Mk. 8:27-30; Lk. 9:18-21; Jn. 6:67-69; Walking on the Sea - Matt. 14:22-33; Mk. 6:45-52; Jn. 6:16-21; Reinstatement to the Apostolate - Jn. 21:15-17, etc.).

The primary goal of this study is to understand and interpret the “ambiguous attitude” of Saint Peter the Apostle, particularly the nature of his relationship with the Lord Christ, according to the accounts of the four Evangelists. Through the exegesis of scriptural passages that describe the Apostle’s character, we aim to outline a response to our research hypothesis: “Ambiguity in Peter’s Attitude towards Jesus?”

The personality of the Apostle Peter is profoundly defined by the moment of his triple denial of Christ, an event that marks a crucial turning point in his life. From that moment on, we speak of a new Peter, a new Apostle, transformed through the drama of his denial and subsequent rehabilitation. This dramatic experience led him to a genuine conversion to life in Christ, acquiring the virtues necessary to become a "fisher of men."

The doctoral thesis is structured into three major sections that follow the significant moments in the life of the Apostle Peter.

## **Part I**

### **Simon Peter – From the call to Apostleship to confessing faith**

The first part comprises seven chapters that highlight the journey of Saint Peter from the Call to Apostleship to the moment of the Confession of Faith in Caesarea Philippi.

The process of Simon Peter's call to Apostleship, covered in the first three chapters of the work, highlights the future disciple's journey from being a simple fisherman (Simon) to becoming an Apostle of Christ (Peter).

The Evangelist John (1:35-42) recounts a first meeting between Simon Peter and Jesus, in which Andrew, Simon's brother, plays an important role. John the Baptist recognizes Jesus as the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:36) and directs two of his disciples to Him (Jn. 1:36-39). One of them is Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. The time Andrew spent with Jesus prompted him to seek out his brother, Simon, and share his joy. Thus, Andrew becomes the first missionary of the Gospel: "*We have found the Messiah*" (which is translated, the Christ) (Jn. 1:40). Andrew brings Simon to Jesus, who looks at him and changes his name from Simon to "Cephas": "You are Simon, son of Jonah; you shall be called Cephas" (which is translated, Peter) (Jn. 1:42). The change of name signifies a new life, a life in Christ. The Evangelist John does not record any words spoken by Peter or any actions taken by him, which suggests a possible initial doubt of Simon regarding the person of Jesus. Simon Peter's attitude is characteristic of a steadfast mind, which does not immediately accept every word (Simon did not immediately accept Andrew's claims) but wished to meet Christ personally to decide whether He was worth following or not.

The Evangelists Matthew and Mark (Matt. 4:18-20, Mk. 1:16-20) describe the actual calling of Peter to Apostleship. With the words "*Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men*" (Matt. 4:19, Mk. 1:17), Jesus extends a call, an invitation to follow Him, which involves a radical reorientation of their lives. The Lord Christ's call reflects a divine authority that does not allow for hesitation, and Peter's immediate response, as he leaves his nets and follows Him, emphasizes the promptness and completeness of his devotion. The investigation of Christ initiated in the Gospel of John (1:40-42) ultimately leads to a firm commitment to follow Him: "*Immediately, they left their nets and followed Him*" (Mt. 4:20, Mk. 1:18). This biblical episode underscores the theme of divine calling that transcends family relationships and daily occupations, highlighting the Apostolic vocation as an essential priority in the new community of the Kingdom.

The Evangelist Luke places the calling of the first disciples within the context of a miracle—the miraculous catch of fish (Lk. 5:1-11). After the miracle of the great catch of fish, Peter falls at Jesus' feet and exclaims, "*Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!*" (Lk. 5:8). Jesus reassures him by saying, "*Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men*" (Lk. 5:10). The account in the Gospel of Luke (5:1-11) provides a profound theological perspective on the Apostolate. It involves not only a human calling but a divine gift that transforms ordinary lives into sacred missions. The call of Christ involves an awareness of sinfulness, an invitation to holiness, a complete reorientation of life, and an immediate and total response. Through this account, Luke emphasizes that the Apostolate is a sacred vocation that requires a profound

transformation and a total commitment to the divine will. All of this is reflected in the attitude of the Apostle Peter: *"But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying (προσεπεσεν τοις γονασιν Ἰησοῦ), Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (ξέλθε ἀπ' ἐμοῦ, ὅτι ἀνὴρ ἁμαρτωλός εἰμι, κύριε) (Lk. 5:8); "they left everything and followed Him" (Lk. 5:11).*

Chapter four addresses the attitude of Saint Peter in the context of the Transfiguration of the Lord (Matt. 17:1-13; Mk. 9:2-9; Lk. 9:28-36). In this setting, the Apostle Peter stands out with his "discourse": *'Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matt. 17:4; Mk. 9:5; Lk. 9:33).*

First, the Apostle expresses his state of amazement and joy (*"Lord, It is good for us to be here"*). The second part of his discourse includes the proposal to remain on Mount Tabor in the divine presence of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, with the intention of building three tabernacles. At this moment, Peter experiences a profound spiritual experience and amazement, which stirs in him a desire to stay permanently in the presence of Christ. However, his proposal to build three tabernacles reflects a mistaken and theologically insufficient reaction, indicating the need for a deeper understanding of the purpose and nature of the divine revelation. Peter's misunderstanding does not lie in the proposal to build three tabernacles per se, but rather in his mistaken intention to fix a moment of divine revelation into a permanent context. In conclusion, Peter's erroneous intention to build three tabernacles during the Transfiguration represents an attempt to prevent Jesus from proceeding to His Passion and Death.

Chapter five highlights the experience of the Apostle Peter, specifically the experience of the Petrine group (Peter, James, and John) at the miracle of the resurrection of Jairus' daughter. Peter's presence at this event prepares him for the understanding of the Mystery of the Resurrection and eternal life.

Chapter six, titled *"Peter's Confession of Faith at Caesarea Philippi,"* captures the Apostle's declaration of faith in Christ as *"the Son of the Living God"* (Matt. 16:13-20; Mk. 8:27-30; Lk. 9:18-21; Jn. 6:67-69). The confession of faith is one of the high peaks of Peter's knowledge. An exegesis of Peter's confession of faith in the context of the four Gospels reveals that it constitutes a complex and profound formulation of the entire Christology. This confession not only highlights the fundamental aspects of the teaching about Jesus Christ but also reflects an evolving theological understanding of His identity and mission. Peter's confession represents a crucial point in the theological understanding of Jesus Christ and provides a solid foundation for the development of Christian doctrine in the early community.



What Peter understood from his confession is not entirely clear. What is certain, however, is that the Apostles' belief about Jesus was different from the misconceptions held by the people. They believed that Christ was the Son of God, but their faith was not yet perfect. This is evident from the subsequent events related to the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ.

The Apostle Peter's Walking on Water represents a reflection on discipleship alongside Jesus (Matt. 14:22-33; Mk. 6:45-52; Jn. 6:16-21). The miracle describes the Apostle caught between two peaks: one of faith ("*Peter said to Him, Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water*" - Matt. 14:28) and that of doubt and falling ("*But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'*" - Matt. 14:30). More than this, each gesture of the Apostle Peter during the miracle of walking on water is emblematic of key moments and stages in his discipleship alongside Jesus Christ. These actions not only highlight his initial courage and faith but also his fear and doubt, providing a holistic view of his spiritual growth process.

## **Part II**

### **The attitude of the Apostle Peter and the Passion of Jesus Christ**

In our exploration of the most dramatic moment in the life of Saint Peter (the triple denial of Christ), we observe that the deterioration of Peter's faith is not the result of a single event, but of a complex process involving multiple dimensions of human and spiritual experience.

In this sense, the first chapter also represents the initial stage in uncovering the cause that led to Peter's denial: "Jesus foretells His Passion to the disciples. Peter 'tempts' the Savior" (Matt. 16:21-23; Mk. 8:31-33). In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus reveals to His disciples the divine plan of His Suffering, Death, and Resurrection. This marks a crucial point in His mission on earth and represents an essential revelation about His salvific role. Peter's intervention: "*Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him*" (Matt. 16:22a; Mk. 8:32b), along with the words spoken: "*God forbid it, Lord! This shall not happen to You!*" (Matt. 16:22), illustrates a conflict between human perspective and the divine plan. Peter wants to protect Christ from suffering, demonstrating a sincere love but limited by his human perspective. He cannot yet understand that suffering and death are an essential part of Christ's salvific mission.

The second stage is marked by the attitude of the Apostle Peter during the Last Supper (Matt. 26:17-29; Mk. 14:10-26; Lk. 22:1-38; Jn. 13). In this chapter, we observe Peter's reaction

to the Lord's act of washing the disciples' feet (Jn. 13:4-17). Initially, Peter's reaction is one of misunderstanding and resistance. Peter cannot conceive of his Teacher and Lord lowering Himself to such an act of humility. This attitude reflects Peter's human and limited perspective. From a theological and hermeneutical interpretation, the washing of the feet by Jesus becomes a profound symbol of spiritual cleansing and the model of a divine leader who serves. This act proves to be not just a ritual practice, but an essential lesson about the nature of service and community within the context of Christian faith.

The third stage included "*The Foretelling of Peter's Denial*" (Matt. 26:30-35; Mk. 14:26-31; Lk. 22:31-34; Jn. 13:36-38). In all the Evangelists' accounts, Peter firmly declares that he will not deny Jesus, and this statement reflects not only his profound devotion to the Savior but also the psychological and theological complexity of this promise. In the Gospel of Matthew (26:33), he boldly declares: "*Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.*" In the Gospel of Luke (22:31-32), Jesus warns Peter about the forthcoming trials: "*Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.*" The Evangelist Luke is the only one who mentions Jesus' prayer for Peter (Lk. 22:32). At this moment, Peter needed more prayer compared to the other apostles because his fall would be greater. Discipleship alongside Christ requires the recognition of one's own weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Excessive confidence in one's own strength, as demonstrated by Peter, leads to a fall.

The fourth stage is represented by Peter's inability to stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46; Mk. 14:33-42; Lk. 22:39-46). The disciples' inability, and especially Peter's, to remain awake and watchful with Jesus highlights human weakness. This episode refers to the necessity of continual prayer to resist temptation. Despite their desire to keep watch with Jesus, the disciples succumb to physical exhaustion, thus reflecting the constant struggle between the willing spirit and the weak flesh. Peter's rebuke by Jesus ("*So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour?*") is a powerful exhortation to vigilance and prayer. Peter, who had shown such courage and devotion, is now confronted with his own weakness. At this moment, Peter's weakness is a tangible experience that highlights the Apostle's inability to fulfill his grand commitments solely through his own strength. This foreshadows his later denial and his need for repentance and strengthening in faith.

The second part of the work concludes with a chapter dedicated to the Triple Denial of Saint Peter (Matt. 26:58, 69-75; Mk. 14:66-72; Lk. 22:55-62; Jn. 18:15-27), which is a consequence of the previously mentioned stages.

The first denial comes from the gatekeeper (Jn. 18:17) who identifies Peter as a disciple of Jesus. He denies Jesus directly at this moment: *"I don't know what you're talking about"* (Mt. 26:70), *"I neither know nor understand what you mean"* (Mk. 14:68), *"Woman, I do not know him"* (Lk. 22:57), *"I am not"* (Jn. 18:17).

The second denial of Peter follows shortly after the first (Lk. 22:58a). It differs from the first, with the moment of accusation and denial being more intense (Mt. 26:72a). In the second denial, Peter renounces his association with the apostolic group, denies his discipleship with Christ, and repudiates his apostleship (Mk. 14:69-70a; Lk. 22:58; Jn. 18:25).

Peter's third denial is much more complex than the previous ones, incorporating elements of them. Through his response, Peter rejects three fundamental aspects: 1. He claims not to know Jesus; 2. He denies his association with the circle of the Twelve Apostles; 3. He denies his identity as a Galilean, thus repudiating his social, cultural, and spiritual identity, and, in effect, his entire life.

Peter's bitter weeping offers a subtle insight into the depth of his horror and sorrow. He weeps and laments for his own sin, fully acknowledging his actions and holding hope in Christ's forgiveness. Christ's gaze fixed on Peter (Lk. 22:61-62) represents an act of forgiveness that precedes Peter's complete restoration.

### **Part III**

#### **The Apostle Peter and the Resurrection of the Lord. a Johannis perspective (John 20–21)**

The Resurrection of Christ is the long-awaited moment for Peter. From the time of his threefold denial, through Christ's gaze (Lk. 22:61-62) and his bitter weeping (Matt. 26:75; Mk. 14:72; Lk. 22:61-62), Peter lives in a continuous anticipation of Jesus, eager to express his regret and demonstrate his love for Him. After the Resurrection of the Lord, the Evangelists present us with "a new personality of Peter." Alongside "the beloved disciple," he runs to the empty tomb, is the first to enter it, and notices the burial cloths and the face cloth arranged in perfect order. At this moment, Peter began to believe not the words of Mary (*"They have taken the Lord"* - John 20:2) but that Christ had risen. Peter's haste in running to the empty tomb can be seen as a desire for reconciliation and restoration of his relationship with Jesus. The news of the empty tomb offered Peter a new hope that Jesus might be alive and that there was a chance for forgiveness and personal restoration (Jn. 21:15-19).

Peter's reinstatement to apostleship, described in the Gospel of John (21:15-19), is a long-awaited moment anticipated since his fall and bitter weeping. Peter's restoration to apostleship is marked by a profound dialogue between him and Jesus.

Jesus gives Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his love and devotion through the three questions and answers. The repeated questions from Jesus to Peter mirror and counterbalance the three denials of the Apostle before the Crucifixion (Matt. 26:69-75; Mk. 14:66-72; Lk. 22:55-62; Jn. 18:15-27). These exchanges emphasize Peter's personal love for Christ and highlight the importance of deep and sincere love in apostolic service. In their dialogue, we observe the humility of the Apostle, as Jesus uses the verb "*ἀγαπάω*" (agapao) twice, while Peter consistently responds with the verb "*φιλέω*" (phileo) in all three of his declarations of love.

The missionary commands: "*Feed my lambs*" and "*Tend my sheep*", used by Jesus in His dialogue with Peter (Jn. 21:15-19), carry profound significance and refer to the pastoral mission and spiritual responsibility that Jesus bestows upon Peter. This command symbolizes the care and spiritual leadership that Peter is to exercise over the community of believers.

## **Conclusions**

The ambivalent attitude of Saint Peter towards Jesus, as described by the Evangelists, reflects the complexity of human nature with all its contradictions and paradoxes. Peter is an example of strong faith as well as human vulnerability. This duality makes Peter's figure deeply relevant and representative of the human experience, characterized by the struggle between faith and doubt, courage and fear, loyalty and betrayal. The Evangelists show us that, despite his weaknesses, Peter becomes an instrument of divine grace, capable of great deeds and profound dedication in proclaiming the Gospel after his reinstatement to apostleship (see Acts 1-15).

The initial ambiguity of Peter's attitude towards Jesus, marked by moments of profound faith and human weakness, is resolved during his confession of love at his reinstatement to apostleship. Peter's love and loyalty, reaffirmed in the presence of Jesus (Jn. 21:15-17), dispel any doubts and establish a clear and unequivocal stance of commitment and dedication to the Savior. Thus, the love confessed in this crucial moment answers the question regarding the ambiguity of Peter's attitude.

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