

Research Note

This is a work of the imagination. But like many novels, *St. Peter's Bones* derives its inspiration from real events and real places, both historical and contemporary.

The germ of my plot grew out of a conversation with Christian activist Aaron Cohen over dinner in Amman, Jordan, where we had traveled on a mission trip to help Iraqi Christian refugees. We had been discussing the way Muslim scholars have interpreted Biblical prophecies, in particular those contained in the Book of Daniel and Revelations 17. (Aaron was completing a PhD on Biblical prophecy at the time, but he is better known for freeing slaves in Sudan and Burma with the Abolish Slavery Coalition and Christian Solidarity International, a remarkable group that truly is doing God's work here on earth). In passing, he mentioned the controversy over the authenticity of the relics of St. Peter that has raged ever since Pope Pius XII announced in 1950 that they had been discovered by Vatican archeologists in a sub-basement of St. Peter's basilica. "If St. Peter's bones are in the Vatican, than the Whore of Babylon mentioned in Revelation 17 is clearly Rome," he said. "But if St. Peter died while taking the Gospel to Babylon and his bones are in Iraq, then we have to take this passage literally."

Aaron himself favored a literal interpretation of scripture, arguing that if God meant Babylon, he would say Babylon; if he meant Rome, he would say

Rome. Obviously, scholars continue to debate this subject. But when I returned to Washington, DC from that trip to Jordan and northern Iraq, I began researching the controversy that Pope Pius XII had fueled, and found it to be full of unanswered questions.

Several books have been written about the discovery of human relics beneath the Vatican in secret excavations during World War II. The first, and most controversial, was published by Vatican insider Margherita Guarducci in 1960, a full decade after the Pope's revelation. (*The Tomb of St. Peter*, available online from www.saintpetersbasilica.org). A more balanced account, which refutes in part Guarducci's claims that the human remains were those of St. Peter, was published in 1982 by Reader's Digest reporter John Evangelist Walsh (*The Bones of St. Peter: The First Full Account of the Search for the Apostle's Body*, also available from www.saintpetersbasilica.org). I have quoted from both, as well as from the original New York Times story revealing the archeological find, at various points in my fictional work.

St. Peter himself, of course, adds to the controversy in his Epistle when he writes, "The chosen church which is at Babylon, and Mark, my son, salute you..." 1 Peter 5:13-14. The ancient Church flourished in the Tigris and Euphrates valleys until the advent of Islam in the 7th century AD, and the Church of the East long has contended that St. Peter himself proselytized Babylon.

For my purposes, however, I chose to sidestep this Biblical controversy and adopt the more widely accepted theory that St. Peter did, in fact, die in Rome, where Christian tradition has him crucified upside down in AD 66. As both the Guarducci and Walsh books pointed out, the bones of St. Peter would have been objects of veneration from the start,

and so were likely to have been preserved in Rome and guarded by devotees. Indeed, there is a Church of St. Peter and St. Paul outside the Vatican to commemorate the spot where Christian lore says the Romans executed the two disciples; this is the most likely place the relics were preserved until they were ultimately moved to the Vatican).

So how did they get to northern Iraq? And why?

My search for an answer to this question led me to an examination of Muslim conquest, and the repeated Muslim invasions of the Italy. Rome was sacked several times by Muslim hordes. “On the second occasion, when Saracens broke into the city in 846, pontifical records tell us that they carried out ‘unspeakable acts’ of desecration at the site,” writes Queens University scholar John Curran. “As a barbaric act of destruction, they may have opened the grave [of St. Peter] and destroyed the remains.”¹

The Saracen attack of 846 AD was so dramatic that Pope Leo IV was forced to flee the city, appealing for help from neighboring kingdoms.²

These events gave me the broad outlines of my plot. Onto this structure, I grafted the story of the monks of the Order of St. Hormizd, whose existence was suggested to me from apocryphal tales of the

¹ John Curran, “The Bones of St. Peter?” Available at http://theshepherdsvoice.org/catholic/the_bones_of_peter.html

² Another useful source on the spread of Islam is Andrew Bostom’s *Legacy of Jihad: Islamic Holy War and the Fate of Non-Muslims* (Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY): 2005, as well as the excellent review that focuses on the events of 846 AD that can be found here: <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/44479?eng=y>

Christian influences on Mohammad that I had heard during my nearly thirty years of travel throughout the Middle East as a war correspondent and reporter.

Not content, however, to just invent a story as grave as that of the founding of Islam, I spent a great deal of time with authentic Muslim sources, starting with the most famous of them all, Ibn Ishaq's *Life of Mohammad*. Ibn Ishaq recounts the influence on Mohammad of a Coptic monk named Bahira, as well as the influence of his wife's cousin, a convert from Christianity who was known to have translated the Gospels into Arabic³. I adapted his account of Mohammad's early success as a caravan leader working in his wife's employ as part of the "Secret Book" of the Guardians of St. Hormizd.

Muslims themselves have debated for centuries the influence of Jewish and Christian sources on Mohammad. A Muslim website aimed at explaining Islam to Western believers states the case that forms the basis for the Secret Book, the fictional text allegedly written by Bahira that intertwines with my contemporary plot:

Orientalists allege that Prophet Muhammad was subject to the Judeo-Christian influence of his time and that the Quran reflects this influence. It was suggested that Prophet Muhammad had faced two big problems if he were to embrace Judaism or Christianity. If he became a Christian, he would be bringing in the Christian Byzantine regime to Makkah, which would not be tolerated by the people of

³ See "Khadijah, Waraqa, and Ubydallah et. al," available at http://www.mukto-mona.com/Articles/kasem/quran_origin4.htm,

Makkah. The second problem was that he could not pretend that he knew more than the older members and priests of those two religions—Judaism and Christianity. Thus, in both instances, he could not acquire leadership. Hence, Orientalists suggest that the Prophet decided to reproduce the role of Moosaa (Moses) or 'Eesaa (Jesus), may Allaah exalt their mention, because he saw that "they were men, and he could do what they had done."

*Orientalists allege that the monotheistic influence on Islam was due to the presence of Christians and Jews in Makkah. They also suggested that there was a monotheist informant from one of those religions.*⁴

Citing Ibn Ishaq, this website also notes that Mohammad was just twelve years old when he first met the Christian monk Bahira while en route to Syria with his uncle. (This episode becomes part of the Secret Book.) The website goes on to refute allegations that Mohammad “received instructions from Waraqah bin Nawfal on Christianity.”

British author William Muir, whose 1857 *Life of Mohammad* first aired these allegations to a Western audience, writes extensively about the Christian influences on Mohammad and represents the “Orientalist” view refuted by today’s Islamists.⁵ The most accessible modern day summary of these authentic

⁴<http://www.islamweb.net/ver2/archive/article.php?lang=E&id=134204>

⁵ Muir’s entire book is available online at <http://www.answering-islam.org/Books/Muir/Life1/pref.htm>

historical texts is Robert Spencer's best-selling account, *The Truth About Mohammad*. (Regnery: 2006).

The passage in the Secret Book about the three "goddesses" of Meccah—known to Muslims as the Satanic verses, because only Satan could have dictated such heresy—of course became famous to a Western audience because of Salman Rushdie's novel of the same title.⁶ My particular twist to this story—comparing them to the Christian triune Godhead—is, I believe, unique.

Hamza's drunken slaughter of the she-camels being prepared for the wedding feast, and Mohammad's subsequent banning of alcohol, is taken from the authoritative Salih Bukhari (Volume 4, Book 53, Number 324). "Did the companions of the apostle of Allah drink wine? What an outrageous question is this!—you may say. Here is the answer—though most Muslims will simply deny the truth. You see, most of Muhammad's companions (except perhaps Umar and Abu Bakr) were habitual drinkers."⁷

The monastery of St. Hormizd does, indeed, exist in the mountains above al Qosh, much as I describe it in the book. The Assyrian Education Network provides a most useful history of al Qosh itself, which outlines the schism between the Eastern and Western churches.⁸ With the advance of

⁶ For some historical background on the moon god Hubul and the three "daughters" of Allah, see <http://www.bible.ca/islam/islam-allahs-daughters.htm>

⁷ The Salih Bukhari hadith, and several more like it, are cited in an interesting exchange among Muslim believers that can be found here:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mukto-mona/message/23760>

⁸<http://www.atour.com/education/20040922a.html>

computer technology into ancient communities, the monastery itself now has its own website.⁹

Well after I had completed the first draft of *St. Peter's Bones*, I had the opportunity through Bill Murray, chairman of the Religious Freedom Coalition—another group that has done wonderful work to support the embattled Christians of the East—to meet Australian scholar of Islam, Mark Durie. His most recent book on dhimmitude, *The Third Choice*, is illuminating.

Mark sent me a link to a remarkable website, written by Muslim scholars, that told the story of the Nestorian monk Bahira and his alleged influence over Mohammad in great detail.¹⁰ He also steered me toward the hadith from Sahih Bukhari, considered the most trusted of all the early Muslim chroniclers, quoted at the end of my book.

As for the rest of the plot, and the characters, they are the result of my three decades of roaming the wilds of the Middle East. While I have certainly used character traits and even snippets of conversation from real persons, the characters themselves are unique. However, the harrowing taxi ride in Amman described by the narrator in chapter 3 is a pretty faithful rendition of a real event that Aaron Cohen and I experienced in 2008.

One final note on the use of a fuel-air explosive in the battle scene at the end of the book. In 1982, I was taken hostage in Beirut by Fatah guerillas loyal to Yaser Arafat. The day I was released (to French diplomats), I witnessed my first Israeli air

⁹http://www.kaldaya.net/2007/4_DailyNews_April2007/Apr19_07_E1_FrNoel_memorel_rabbanhormizd.html

¹⁰ http://www.mukto-mona.com/Articles/kasem/quran_origin4.htm

raid from above ground, after having been pummeled in the underground darkness for 24 days. From the next morning's newspapers, I learned that the raid had destroyed the building where I had been held just hours before, leaving a crater more than 50 feet deep where the building had once been. The Lebanese papers claimed the Israelis had used a new kind of weapon, which they called a "vacuum bomb." Later, I learned that it was an FAE weapon—the first time that a FAE had been used by a non-U.S. air force in combat. I have tried to faithfully describe the extraordinary destructive power of this weapon in the book. Without the power and intervention of my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Messiah, I would have been a victim of that attack. Out of those ashes, I was quite literally born again. Praise be to You, Lord Christ.

—Kenneth R. Timmerman