

St. Peter and St. Paul
June 29 RCL
Revised

Ezekiel 34:11-16

From his exile in the Babylonian city of Nippur, the prophet Ezekiel meditated on the causes of Israel's destruction in 722 BCE and Judah's defeat in 597 BCE. In Ezekiel 34:1-10, the prophet used the familiar Near Eastern figure of the king as a shepherd to conclude that the "shepherds" (kings) of Israel and Judah through their misrule had brought about these disasters. Our passage (verses 11-16) announces God's promise to reign as the good shepherd/king of Israel from now on and to restore the "flock" to its own good land.

Psalm 87

This is a song of Zion in which Jerusalem, not God, serves as the direct object of praise. See Psalms 46; 48;76; 84; 122; 132; and now the Apocryphon to Zion in the Psalm Scroll from Qumran Cave 11. The function of the Psalm almost certainly had to do with a liturgical procession into Jerusalem; but the only references to people in the psalm consist of references to foreign peoples. So we may already be dealing with the view we encounter now and then in rabbinic texts that Jerusalem constitutes the center or even the navel of the earth, from which all nations stem. Gerstenberger thinks of Psalm 87 as an "admission pronouncement," admitting gentiles to limited participation in the temple cult. This imaginative suggestion finds little evidential support. About all we can safely say about Psalm 87 is that we have in it a hymn to Zion that clearly recognizes the equal interest and share all peoples have in Jerusalem.

2 Timothy 4:1-8

Researchers now consider the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy and Titus) as second-century works written in Paul's name but addressing false teachings that Paul himself never faced. Here the unknown author reminds readers that keeping the faith amounts to much more than merely teaching certain principles. Sometimes, faithfulness involves standing utterly alone to answer the calumnies of those opposed to the Gospel, *i. e.* false teachers. The "myths" to which people will desert the truth consist of genealogies (1 Timothy 1:4) and superstitions labeled "Jewish" in Titus 1:14. The reference to Jewish myths that involve genealogies point to esoteric, even Gnostic teachings, such as those in Gnostic works like The Hypostasis of the Archons or the Apocryphon of John from Nag Hammadi.

John 21:15-19

Because of the words of John 20:30-31, most interpreters believe a student of the original author added John 21 to the Gospel. The controversy over the death of the "beloved disciple" in 21:20-25 has convinced many investigators that the occasion for the additional chapter was the actual death of this revered figure whom some Christians thought would live until the second coming. Another death, arguably even more important than that of the beloved disciple, the martyr's death of Peter, was also known to the readers; and the present writer addresses this loss as well. The passage gives only obscure details of Peter's death in 21:18-19, but Christian tradition has supplied additional details. We find several legends about the death of Peter in Rome in the Acts of Peter, a late second-century work. In that writing we learn that Peter died because his preaching inspired four of the concubines of the prefect Agrippa as well as Xanthippe, the beautiful wife of Albinus, to embrace chastity and follow Peter. Warned by Xanthippe of the husbands' plot to kill him, Peter began an escape from their wrath in disguise; but a vision of Christ entering Rome to be crucified again convinced the apostle that he should turn around and follow Jesus to glory. At his execution, Peter requested that the officials crucify him upside down because of his unworthiness to die in the same manner as his Lord (Acts of Peter 3.33-40). It is virtually impossible to believe, however, that John 21 has anything to do with these stories. Although Christian writers like Clement of Rome, Tertullian, and Origen also wrote about Peter's martyrdom, the specific traditions blended in the Acts of Peter comprise the first detailed accounts we have and certainly postdate John 21.