

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” (John 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). About one hundred years later, Tertullian states that Nero was the one responsible for the apostles’ deaths (*Scorpiace* 15). He refers to Rome as “a fortunate church . . . where Peter had a passion like that of the Lord, where Paul was crowned with the death of John” (*Praescriptione* 35). The reference to Peter having a passion “like that of the Lord” 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 and then explained the elaborate and esoteric symbolism of the act (something like birth imagery, recalling Adam). Elsewhere, the Jewish historian Josephus notes that soldiers sometimes amused themselves by crucifying criminals in different positions, so it is possible that the *Acts of Peter* is not inventing the story but rather supplying theological reasons to explain an actual fact regarding Peter’s execution (a humiliating detail passed over by others).