

Jot & Tittle

A Journal Devoted to the Study of the Inspired Word of God

January 2004

Upon this Rock

by Dana L. Goodnough

While each of the Synoptic Gospels records Peter's great confession in which he declared that Jesus is the Messiah, only Matthew includes Jesus' response to Peter. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said to Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." But who or what was the "rock" to which Jesus referred?

An Overview of the Major Views

The difficulty in identifying the "rock" in Matthew 16:18 lies somewhat in the inability of the English translations to reflect the word play between Peter's name and the word "rock." The name "Peter" means "rock" and Jesus was, to put it in modern English form, calling this disciple "The Rock." However, the proper name is a masculine Greek word and "rock" is a feminine Greek word, allowing for a distinction between Peter and the "rock." "In Greek 'Peter' is *petros* and 'rock' is *petra* (the difference being simply that between the masculine termination *-os*, necessary in a man's name, and the feminine termination *-a*)."¹

The difficulty in identifying the "rock" is further intensified by the Protestant reaction against the Roman Catholic perspective. Roman Catholicism considers Peter to be the first Pope, the "rock" upon whom the church is built. While Roman Catholicism does use

this verse to defend its view of the primacy of Peter and the authority of the Pope, this application does not necessarily discount the interpretation that Peter is the rock. Carson argues, "If it were not for Protestant reactions against extremes of Roman Catholic interpretations, it is doubtful whether many would have taken 'rock' to be anything or anyone other than Peter."² Bruce says, "Certainly there is nothing in the context to suggest Rome or the papacy."³

These difficulties in interpretation have yielded basically three different perspectives on the identity of the "rock" in Jesus' statement. "Generally speaking there are three positions which are held—the rock is Peter; the rock is Christ; and the rock is the truth of Peter's confession."⁴

Peter as the Rock

Those who hold that the rock is to be identified as Peter see this as the most natural understanding of the text. Saucy says, "The most natural interpretation, however, would appear to be the best. Using a play on words, Christ calls His disciple Peter (*Petros*) which means 'a rock' and then adds, 'upon this rock [*petra*] I will build my church' (Mt 16:18), which would most naturally mean 'upon you.'"⁵

But can this interpretation adequately account for the shift from a masculine to a feminine form of the Greek noun, from *petros* to *petra*? Bruce points out that the Greek words originally had an underlying Aramaic base, the common language of Jews in Jesus' day. "In the Aramaic which Jesus probably spoke, there was not even such a minor grammatical distinction between the two forms: 'You are *kepha*,' he said, 'and on this *kepha* I will build my church.' The form *kepha*, as applied to Peter, appears in many New Testament versions as Cephias (for example, in Jn 1:42; 1 Cor 1:12), an alternative form of his name."⁶ Carson further discounts the difference between the masculine and feminine Greek forms: "The Peshitta (written in Syriac, a language cognate with Aramaic) makes no distinction between the words in the two clauses. The Greek makes the distinction between *petros* and *petra* simply because it is trying to preserve the pun, and in Greek the feminine *petra* could not very well serve as a masculine name."⁷ Therefore, identifying the rock as Peter is an acceptable interpretation of the text.

Jesus as the Rock

Other Bible scholars prefer to see the “rock” upon whom Jesus Christ builds His church as Jesus Himself. Ironside takes this view:

‘This rock’ is Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). He it is on whom the Church is built. Peter means a stone, or a piece of a rock. He was to be built into the Church. The Church was not to be built on him.⁸

In fact, 1 Corinthians 10:4 does refer to Jesus as the spiritual rock from which the Israelites drank during their wilderness wanderings. Furthermore, Peter, in applying Isaiah 8:14 to Jesus, calls Jesus a rock (1 Peter 2:8). However, in his own words Peter refers to Jesus as a cut and polished stone (a different Greek word, *lithos*) rather than a rock (1 Peter 2:4). The reference to Jesus as a rock in 1 Corinthians 10:4 does little to support the view that Jesus referred to Himself in Matthew 16:18, since “metaphors are commonly used variously” and “metaphors must be interpreted primarily with reference to their immediate contexts.”⁹ Not every reference to a rock in Scripture will point to Jesus. While this interpretation is possible, it does not seem preferable.

Peter’s Confession as the Rock

A third interpretation sees Peter’s confession as the “rock” to which Jesus referred. Toussaint objects to the idea that Jesus referred to Peter as the rock:

In the first place, the Lord could easily have said “on you” (ἐπὶ σοῦ) to remove the ambiguity. Why should the Lord use the pronoun “this” (ταυτη) if He were speaking directly to Peter as He is in the immediately preceding and following contexts? A second objection is found in the distinctive meanings of *πετρα* and *πετρος*. Invariably *πετρα* is used of a shelf or ledge of rock or of a mass of rock, while *πετρος* is used of a stone.¹⁰

Toussaint says that a better view interprets the rock to be the truth of Peter’s confession. “It is the truth of Christ’s person and work upon which the church shall be built. This fits the use the Lord makes of

ταυτη and also the sense of *πετρα*.”¹¹ However, the fact that Jesus says “upon this rock” while addressing Peter doesn’t mean that Peter couldn’t be the “rock.” The shift from a second person to a third person can lend itself to emphasis within a conversation. Regarding the meaning of *petros* and *petra*, there may be no distinction other than the “play on words”¹² rather than any meaningful distinction in the definitions of these words.

Conclusion

While it is possible that the “rock” in Jesus’ statement is the truth of Peter’s confession or Jesus Christ Himself, it seems preferable to understand Jesus as referring to Peter. Peter would become the leader of the apostolic church, as indeed the book of Acts indicates. But whatever interpretation is correct, the primary teaching is that Jesus Christ would be the builder of His church. Jesus Christ is still building His church today.

¹ Bruce, F. F. “Hard Sayings of Jesus” in *Hard Sayings of the Bible* by Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Brauch. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, p. 384.

² Carson, D. A. “Matthew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8. Frank E. Gaebelin, editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, p. 368.

³ Bruce, p. 383.

⁴ Toussaint, Stanley D. *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew*. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980, pp. 201-202.

⁵ Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God’s Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, p. 63.

⁶ Bruce, p. 384.

⁷ Carson, p. 368.

⁸ Ironside, H. A. *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew*. Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948, p. 205.

⁹ Carson, p. 368.

¹⁰ Toussaint, p. 202.

¹¹ Toussaint, p. 202.

¹² Bauer, Walter; Arndt, William F.; Gingrich, F. Wilbur; Danker, Frederick W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 654.