

# Was Peter the “Rock”?

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*In an article published sometime back, we denied that Peter was the “rock” upon which Christ built his church, as alleged by Roman Catholicism. A kindly critic objects to this position. Wayne Jackson discusses the matter further.*

On December 20, 2000, we posted an article on our web site titled, Reflections on the Pope. The general thrust of the essay was to demonstrate, in a condensed format, that there is no New Testament evidence sustaining the Roman Catholic claim that the apostle Peter was the first “pope” of the church. Not only is there a complete absence of any biblical data asserting that relationship, there is much evidence against the idea.

In our discussion of these matters, we called attention to Matthew 16:18-19, a text commonly employed by Roman Catholic scholars to buttress the dogma of Peter’s primacy. It is well-known that Catholicism alleges that Peter was the “rock” upon which the church was founded. The argument has been constructed upon the fact that both “Peter” (*petros*) and “rock” (*petra*) are from the same Greek stem. What this supposedly indicates, therefore, is that the church was built upon Peter, hence the origin of papal authority.

In our article we listed four contextual considerations that negate this interpretation.

- ✍ *Petros* and *petra* reflect different genders – the former is masculine, the latter is feminine; thus a distinction is drawn.
- ✍ *Petros* generally is a smaller stone, a fragment; *petra* is a more massive, bedrock-like substructure.
- ✍ Christ distinguished between *petros* and *petra* by the use of pronouns of different person. *Petros* has a second person pronoun as a companion, while *petra* is used with a third person pronoun.

In the symbolism employed by Jesus, Peter is designated as the one who opens the doors to the kingdom (which he did for Jew and Gentile – Acts 2; 10). It is not customary for an object to occupy *two* roles, e.g., the foundation and door-opener, at the same time in the same metaphorical illustration.

## A Critic Responds

In response to our article, a courteous critic from South America, who praises our web site generally, believes there is a flaw in our argument.

- ✍ First, he contends that many Protestant scholars affirm that Peter is the “rock” upon whom the church is built, as per Matthew 16:18.
- ✍ Second, he disputes that element of our argument which draws a distinction between the masculine *petros*, and the feminine, *petra*. He alleges that since Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek, there is no valid point here – because in Aramaic there would be no gender distinction; (*kepha*) would be employed in both instances.

We appreciate the kindly tone and well-meaning intention of our respondent, but we do not believe his objection is compelling. Note the following:

- ✍ It does not matter that many Protestant scholars (e.g., Alford, Bloomfield, Cullman, Carson, etc.) identify the “rock” as Peter. The issue is, what does the *actual evidence* indicate?
- ✍ In addition, it is one thing to suggest that Peter was the rock (mistakenly, I believe); it is quite another to argue that papal authority necessarily results from that alleged identification. For example, Bloomfield, who is cited by Conway (p. 148) in this regard, says “this cannot be supposed to give Peter any supremacy over the rest of the apostles (p. 79; see also Mundle, pp. 384ff).
- ✍ It is an assumption that Jesus spoke Aramaic on this occasion. Certainly that is the most likely possibility, but the truth is, as Robert Gundry has shown, most Palestineans of the first century were tri-lingual, speaking Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek (pp. 404-408). So we cannot be positive what dialect Jesus spoke on this occasion.

Be that as it may, when the Lord changed Simon’s name to Peter, he employed a Hellenized form of the term that is masculine in gender, *kephas* (see Jn. 1:42). T.H. Robinson conceded that while there is only one word in Aramaic (and it is feminine), when a man’s name is used, it can take a masculine form (p. 141; see also Foster, p. 715).

Additionally, the fact is, Matthew’s Gospel record was written in *Greek*; and the Greek clearly reflects a distinction between the masculine *petros*, and the feminine *petra*. So the argument stands.

This point is alleged to be negated, however, by the supposition that Matthew originally penned his Gospel account in Aramaic, and so the Greek edition is merely a later translation. This view is based mostly upon a quotation from Papias (c. A.D. 135), as preserved by Eusebius (3.39).

But Papias’ statement is quite ambiguous, and as Carson notes, few scholars today accept this view. He contends that “much evidence suggests that [Matthew] was first composed in Greek” (pp. 11-12). Hiebert has observed that there are certain “linguistic features” of Matthew’s record which “indicate that it was *originally* written in Greek” (p. 53; emp. WJ).

While there is obviously a word-play between “Peter” and “rock,” Mounce noted, with considerable force, that had Jesus intended to affirm clearly that Peter was to be the “foundation” of the church, he simply could have said: “And upon *you* I will build my church” (p. 162; emp. WJ).

Frequently the “church fathers” are appealed to as proof that the early Christians believed that Peter was the “rock” upon which the church was founded. However, as Dreyer and

Weller have shown, “Only sixteen out of the eighty-four early church fathers believed that the Lord referred to Peter when He said ‘this rock’“ (p. 42).

If this conversation between Christ and Peter was intended to establish the fact that the church was to be built upon the apostle himself (with the implication of successors), it is strange indeed that Mark, who produced his Gospel record from the vantage point of *Peter* (see Eusebius, 2.15), totally omits the exchange (see Mk. 8:27-30).

With sincere respect, therefore, to our critic, we believe our original argument retains its validity, and that the “rock” upon which the church was to be built was the *truth acknowledged by Peter*, namely that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and not the apostle himself (see Allen, p. 176).

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