

# ‘All Greek To Me’ : Bedrock

Πέτρα *petra* *pet'-ra* a mass of rock, bedrock

Πέτρος *Petros* *pet'-ros* a boulder or large stone

Many people know the passage in **Matthew 16**, where Peter comes out with the dramatic statement that Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited Anointed One, the Son of the living God, and then immediately Jesus tells him “*I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.*” (**Matthew 16:18-19**)

Countless battles and misunderstandings have sprung from this verse and it lies at the heart of one of the big divisions in organised religion. Did the Lord Jesus **really** mark Peter out as someone special, or was he saying something else completely different?

A little look at the Greek may help us to disentangle some of the confusion. It is important to remind ourselves that looking into the Greek is not some clever intellectual exercise, but rather a way for us to begin to understand more clearly the meaning that would have been **immediately obvious** to the very average person as they read these words or listened to them being read out loud.

Greek was the common language of the Roman Empire, and this passage helps us to realise that Jesus most likely spoke Greek. He would have learned it in his childhood, brought up as he was in ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’. As a Jew, he spoke Aramaic (the local language at that time) and he also knew the Hebrew of the ancient scriptures, but this conversation with Peter is a play on words which only seems to work in Greek!

I used to think that this passage in **Matthew 16** is when Jesus actually gives Peter his nickname, but it does not actually say that. In fact, **John 1:42** makes it clear that Jesus gave Simon the nickname of ‘*Petros*’ in Greek (‘*Cephas*’ in Jewish Aramaic) right at the very beginning of their relationship, long before Peter’s famous declaration. Interesting to see that Andrew, Peter’s brother, actually introduces Peter to Jesus by telling him “We have found the Messiah”. A very good start! Andrew had already realised who Jesus was, right at the start and before Peter had even met him!

So, what does ‘*petros*’ mean? It is not used in the New Testament *except* as a name for Simon Peter, but the word ‘*petra*’ – translated ‘rock’ in this verse – turns up 15 times. Let’s look at the different words for stone and rock . . .

It goes very much by size:–

First, the smallest one. ‘*Psephos*’ A pebble, worn smooth by the waves or by constant handling, small enough to be used as a voting token. Used in just 2 verses in the New Testament. ‘Casting your vote’ meant literally throwing the voting pebble into the appropriate container to indicate who you were voting for, representing your choice. A few years ago, some UK supermarkets organised gifts to charities and, when you went through the checkout, you were given a plastic token and invited to put it in the container marked with the name of the charity of your choice. The supermarket staff emptied the containers, counted how many tokens had been given to each charity, and divided the gifts accordingly. Exactly the same as voting with a pebble! Each pebble (or token) represented the choice of one person, but their identity was hidden. The original ‘secret ballot’ – ?

In **Acts 26:10**, Paul says that he cast his vote (*psephos*) against Christians when the early persecution took place in Jerusalem. He may or may not have actually taken part in the physical

stoning of Stephen, but he almost certainly cast his vote against him (**Acts 7:58-8:1**). In **Revelation 2:17**, *psephos* has a much better meaning, but still representing choice and hidden identity! One of the promises to 'overcomers' is that the risen Lord Jesus will give them (us?) a white stone (*psephos*) with a new name written on it which is only known to the Lord and to the one who receives it. The new name is an indicator of a new life, a new nature and, most of all, a new identity. It's a secret between the Lord and his faithful follower and speaks of choice, closeness and 'specialness'.

Next, the really common word for stone, *lithos*. (54 NT verses) We see this in several English words, such as monolith, Neolithic and lithography. It was the general word for 'a stone', something small enough to pick up, but bigger and rougher than a pebble. It also forms the basis of the word describing things made of stone, such as the stone jars that held the water which Jesus turned into wine (**John 6:26**), and for the word meaning 'to stone', as for example when Stephen was stoned to death (**Acts 7:58**). So a *lithos* was small enough to pick up but large enough to cause serious injury or death when it was thrown at someone. (Paul survived stoning in **Acts 14:19-20**)

Next up in size is *petros* and its Aramaic equivalent *cephas*. *Petros* seems to indicate a really large stone, a boulder, too big to lift but still a piece of stone, not a solid outcrop of rock like a cliff or a mountain crag. One commentary says "In the ancient Greek *petra* was used for the massive ledge of rock like Stone Mountain [Georgia, USA] while *petros* was a detached fragment of the ledge, though itself large." Another says "a detached mass of rock." More locally, we might think of *petra* as being used for the massive stone outcrops of Dartmoor tors and *petros* for some of the big chunks of stone that have fallen off those tors and lie at their feet.

Which brings us to *petra*. This is used 15 times in the New Testament, always for large masses of rock, sometimes referring to the Lord himself and sometimes for bedrock on which foundations are laid. We'll look at some of these but check the full list at the end.

(The root of *petra* and *petros* turns up in English words like 'petrified' – 'turned to stone' and 'petroleum' – 'rock oil'.)

*Petra* as a solid foundation:–

**Matthew 7:24-25, Luke 6:48-49** Jesus tells parables about houses built on rock (*petra*) or on sand/soil.

*Petra* as large outcrops of rock:–

**Matthew 27:51** Rocks were split at the actual moment of Jesus' death on the cross.

**Matthew 27:60, Mark 15:46** Jesus' body was taken to the tomb that Joseph of Aramathea had carved out of the solid rock.

**Revelation 6:15-16** Caves and rocks in the mountains as places to attempt to hide from the presence of God.

*Petra* as rock under thin soil:–

**Luke 8:6,13** In Luke's version of the parable of the Seeds and Sower, some seed actually falls on rock (*petra*). Perhaps just a bit of damp dust on the rock, enough for the seed to germinate, but not enough for it to grow properly.

**Matthew 13:5, 20, Mark 4:5,16** Matthew's and Mark's versions describe the soil as 'rocky' (*petrodes*). Another way of saying the same thing; a thin layer of soil over rock.

In all three of these passages, Jesus is not talking about little stones in the soil, but about bedrock that is at or near the surface of the soil. The seed failed because it 'did not have much soil' or 'had no moisture', and therefore could not establish a firm root.

*Petra* as a description of the Lord Jesus:–

**1 Corinthians 10:4** Paul says that the rock from which the Jews drank water on their journey from Egypt actually followed them through the wilderness and that it was in fact Christ himself!

These uses of *petra* in other places in the New Testament serve to underline what *petra* meant. When the Lord Jesus called Simon 'Peter' (*Petros*), there could have been no possible confusion for anyone who heard him. He was NOT saying that Peter was the foundation for the Church,

rather that Peter was a chunk of the same sort of rock that WOULD BE the foundation on which Jesus was going to build his Church. A boulder is not big enough to be a foundation for a building, but bedrock certainly IS!

Perhaps like a builder pointing to a large boulder of granite and saying 'I am going to build a house from this rock.' Obviously there is not enough rock in just one boulder to build a complete house, but the builder is saying that he will build a house from **the same type of rock**, i.e. in that case, granite!

So, instead of getting side-tracked into asking whether Peter was the foundation of the Church, we need to look at what sort of rock (*petra*) Jesus was talking about.

Some people say that it was the **confession** that Peter made that was the real foundation: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That is certainly vital but it is not the whole story . . .

We are looking at foundations. Foundations for the Church and foundations in our own individual lives. The foundations for the Church **ARE** the foundations in our own lives! It is absolutely vital that we have the right foundations.

What came before Peter's declaration? The Lord says that Peter has received revelation from 'my Father in the heavens.' By the Holy Spirit, Jesus' true identity has been revealed to Peter. (The Greek literally means that something has been uncovered – the lid has been taken off!) It was only because of that revelation that Peter was able to make that bold declaration.

"Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you" says Jesus, but we have already seen that Peter's own brother Andrew **introduced** Peter to Jesus by saying that "We have found the Messiah" (**John 1:41**). So, if Andrew had already told him all that time ago down near the Jordan, what was different up here in Caesarea Philippi?

Yes, all those months earlier, Andrew had told Peter that they had found the Messiah and, in the time since then, other people had made similar comments (see **Matthew 12:23**). Not much later, the whole of Jerusalem would ring with the ecstatic cries of the crowds shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!" (**Matthew 21:9**) Just a few days later, they would be calling for his execution!

Andrew's earlier description had attracted Peter's attention, so he had come and met and started to follow Jesus. The crowds who were shouting 'Hosanna' were following their own ideas. Despite all their words about 'the Son of David', when they were asked who Jesus was, their answer was that Jesus was a prophet. They didn't really know his true identity. That demanded revelation – which they had not received!

But revelation does not come randomly, out of the blue. To be real revelation, it needs to be based on facts. I might claim to have a 'revelation' that the moon is made of cream cheese, but of course it would be completely worthless because it would not be based on fact. As we have already seen, the Greek word for 'revelation' and 'revealing' means taking off a cover so that what is there is no longer hidden.

Jesus already was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, but that fact was hidden to most people. Peter recognised him only because the Father 'uncovered' the facts.

So, perhaps a clearer picture is emerging of what this bedrock is that Jesus is talking about. Yes, it is seen through Peter's declaration. The declaration is based on spiritual revelation and the revelation is based on **fact**. The declaration would be worthless if it did not come from real revelation and the revelation would be spurious if the facts did not support it.

Looking at it the other way, the facts on their own achieve nothing. They need to be made real to individuals, to you and to me, by the Holy Spirit 'taking off the lid' and showing us living truth. Jesus himself said it and, in their letters, Paul and Peter both underline this need.<sup>1</sup>

But Simon Peter did not stop at receiving the revelation that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of  
<sup>1</sup> See (for example) **Luke 10:22, John 6:63, Ephesians 1:15-23, 1 Corinthians 2:1-13, 2 Corinthians 3:6 & 4:6, Galatians 1:11-12, Colossians 1:9-12, 2 Peter 1:2-4**

the living God. He spoke it out! This ‘speaking out’ is also a vital part of the foundational bedrock on which Jesus says that he will build his Church, as Paul clearly tells us in **Romans 10:6-10**: *“But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: ‘Do not say in your heart “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down), or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).’ But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ – that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.”*

Jesus spoke about the rock (*petra*) of foundation for the Church. Paul is describing the establishing of that same foundation in one person’s life. Just a few verses later (**v.17**) he writes *“faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”*

The first step here is the word of Christ – in other words, the message, the information about what God has done for us in Jesus. Declaring the facts.

Step two is ‘hearing’ those facts. The message gets through to us and begins to make sense, and we begin to see that it answers our needs.

Then we begin to believe it and trust it – the word ‘faith’ is **trust**, really.

Only then are we ready to speak it out, to declare it, and Paul says something surprising here: It is as we speak out our faith that we enter into ‘salvation’ – moving out of Satan’s dominion and into the kingdom of God. This is one reason why baptism is so important; it is a public declaration of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and ‘cements’ the belief that is in our hearts.

So, there we have it – the bedrock on which the Lord Jesus says that he will build his Church. Peter is not that bedrock, but his revelation and response are an excellent example of how the foundation is established in one life. As the same foundation is established in more lives, so the Church begins to be built.

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And now the verses . . .

*‘psephos’* – a pebble. Acts 26:10, Revelation 2:17.

*‘lithos’* – a bigger stone. Matthew 3:9, 4:3, 4:6, 7:9, 21:42, 21:44, 24:2, 27:60, 27:66, 28:2, Mark 5:5, 12:10, 13:1, 13:2, 15:46, 16:3, 16:4, Luke 3:8, 4:3, 4:11, 17:2, 19:40, 19:44, 20:17, 20:18, 21:5, 21:6, 22:41, 24:2, John 8:7, 8:59, 10:31, 11:38, 11:39, 11:41, 20:1, Acts 4:11, 17:29, Romans 9:32, 9:33, 1 Corinthians 3:12, 2 Corinthians 3:7, 1 Peter 2:4, 2:5, 2:6, 2:7, 2:8, Revelation 4:3, 17:4, 18:12, 18:16, 18:21, 21:11, 21:19.

*‘petros’* – a boulder, Simon Peter’s nickname. Matthew 4:18, 8:14, 10:2, 14:28, 14:29, 15:15, 16:16, 16:18, 16:22, 16:23, 17:1, 17:4, 17:24, 18:21, 19:27, 26:33, 26:35, 26:37, 26:40, 26:58, 26:69, 26:73, 26:75, Mark 3:16, 5:37, 8:29, 8:32, 8:33, 9:2, 9:5, 10:28, 11:21, 13:3, 14:29, 14:33, 14:37, 14:54, 14:66, 14:67, 14:70, 14:72, 16:7, Luke 5:8, 6:14, 8:45, 8:51, 9:20, 9:28, 9:32, 9:33, 12:41, 18:28, 22:8, 22:34, 22:54, 22:55, 22:58, 22:60, 22:61, 24:12, John 1:40, 1:42, 1:44, 6:8, 6:68, 13:6, 13:8, 13:9, 13:24, 13:36, 13:37, 18:10, 18:11, 18:15, 18:16, 18:17, 18:18, 18:25, 18:26, 18:27, 20:2, 20:3, 20:4, 20:6, 21:2, 21:3, 21:7, 21:11, 21:15, 21:17, 21:20, 21:21, Acts 1:13, 1:15, 2:14, 2:37, 2:38, 3:1, 3:3, 3:4, 3:6, 3:11, 3:12, 4:8, 4:13, 4:19, 5:3, 5:8, 5:9, 5:15, 5:29, 8:14, 8:20, 9:32, 9:34, 9:38, 9:39, 9:40, 10:5, 10:9, 10:13, 10:14, 10:17, 10:18, 10:19, 10:21, 10:25, 10:26, 10:32, 10:34, 10:44, 10:45, 10:46, 11:2, 11:4, 11:7, 11:13, 12:3, 12:5, 12:6, 12:7, 12:11, 12:14, 12:16, 12:18, 15:7, Galatians 2:7, 2:8, 1 Peter 1:1, 2 Peter 1:1.

*‘petrodes’* – rocky Matthew 13:5, 13:20, Mark 4:5, 4:16.

*‘petra’* – bedrock Matthew 7:24, 7:25, 16:18, 27:51, 27:60, Mark 15:46, Luke 6:48, 8:6, 8:13, Romans 9:33, 1 Corinthians 10:4, 1 Peter 2:8, Revelation 6:15, 6:16.

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