

Matthew 16:18: Who Is the Rock?

Matthew 16:18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

There are hermeneutical principles which are tantamount to proper interpretation and exegesis of Scripture. The first is 'Scripture interprets Scripture,' and subsequently, other principles follow in close pursuit. They are (1) do not neglect the 'context' of a word or verse, (2) examine the use of similar words by the recorder of Scripture in other books, and (3) a complete review of all 66 books of 'inspired' inscripturated Words pertaining to the text.

The Scripture verse in question, Matthew 16:18, has been used and abused by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) for fifteen centuries. The "Pulpit Commentary" made these apropos comments:

"Upon this passage chiefly the claims of the Roman church, which for fifteen centuries have been the subject of acrimonious controversy, are founded. It is hence assumed that the Christian Church is founded upon Peter and his successors, and that these successors are the Bishops of Rome."¹

"To see here an assurance of the infallibility of the pope, as Romanists do, is to force the Words of Scripture most unwarrantably in order to support a modern figment which has done infinite harm to the cause of Christ. As Erasmus says, "...qui locum hunc **detorqueant** ad Romanum Pontificem."² ["...who **distort** this place to the Roman Pontiff." [my emphasis, HDW]

Erasmus, a great scholar, who was the compiler of the first printed *Textus Receptus* and a former priest of the Roman Catholic Church and who denied most RCC doctrines, indicated in the quote *above* that the Roman Catholic Church wrongly applies Matthew 16:18 to justify the position and attributes of the RC pope. Albert Barnes, the commentator on the entire Bible, states:

"But Christ did not mean, as the Roman Catholics say he did, to exalt Peter to supreme authority above all the other apostles, or to say that he was the only one on whom he [Peter] was the only one on whom he would rear his church. See Acts 15, where the advice of James, and not of Peter, was followed. See also Gal. 2:11, where Paul withstood Peter to his face, because he was to be blamed—a thing which could not have happened if Christ, as the Roman Catholics say, meant that Peter should be absolute and infallible. More than all, it is not said here or anywhere else in the Bible, that Peter should have infallible successors who should be the vicegerents of Christ, and the head of the church. The whole meaning of the passage is this: 'I will make you the honoured instrument of making known my gospel first to Jews and Gentiles, and will make you a firm distinguished preacher in building my church.'"

Great violence, additions, and false interpretations of the inspired Scripture are made to reach conclusions proclaimed by the Roman church.

There are three views that have been held on the interpretation of this passage.

1. That Christ himself is the Rock on which the Church should be built.
2. That Peter's confession of Jesus Christ as Son of God, or God incarnate, is the Rock.
3. That St. Peter is the rock.³

There have been great discussions in the literature about the Greek and, alleged Aramaic words that lie behind the English text. Some would even venture to change the Greek inspired Words to Aramaic Words. Since the Scripture was given by the Holy Spirit in Greek, there is danger in switching the language to Aramaic. Yes, particular analyses would be made easier to substantiate an interpretation by claiming that Aramaic words lie behind the English text,⁴ but the text is in Greek and with the Greek is what we must deal.

The play on words in Matthew 16:18 to a student of Scripture is obvious. Jesus said to the apostle Peter: "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter." [καγο δε σοι λεγο οτι συ ει πετρος] In the Greek text, emphasis is on what is recorded **first**. In this case, it is "I say" [kago]. Jesus is emphasizing a truth by placing "kago" first; it is another truth comparable to the one just expounded in verses Mat. 16:16-17, that Jesus was the Christ by Peter:

Matthew 16:16-17 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

In other words, kago in verse 18 indicates:

"The Father hath revealed to thee one truth, and I also tell you another."⁵

Here is the "another" truth. The Greek "Πετρος" is simply the Greek word for Aramaic "Cephas" interpreted in John 1:42 as "stone." Jesus gave "Cephas" the name "Peter." It is a masculine, singular, nominative, noun. In the next phrase, Jesus says: "and upon this rock" [και επι ταυτη τη πετρα]. The "rock" is Greek "petra," which is a feminine, singular, dative, noun.

A "petra" is a "rock" as **opposed to** or **distinguished from** "a fragment of rock" or "stone," "Πετρος"⁶ This play on words is to emphasize that "the church of the living God" (1 Tim. 3:15) would be built upon a 'firm, solid Rock, who is the Resurrected, Lord Jesus Christ.' Multilingual men, who spoke Greek as one of their languages, would understand this immediately: the "Rock" in verse 18 is no fragment; it is so solid, firm, or established that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." There is no more solid Rock than the Lord of glory Who was the incarnate God, God the Son, who is "the Word" [Λογος, Logos], the Truth, the Way, the Life (Jn. 1:14; 14:6), the Saviour (Ephesians 5:23). Further, God, is repeatedly called the "Rock" in the Old and New Testament descriptions and theophanies:

Deuteronomy 32:4 He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he.

Deuteronomy 32:15 But Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked: thou art waxen fat, thou art grown thick, thou art covered with fatness; then he forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation.

Deuteronomy 32:30-31 How should one chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight, except their Rock had sold them, and the LORD had shut them up? For their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves being judges.

2 Samuel 22:32 For who is God, save the LORD? and who is a rock, save our God?

Psalms 18:31 For who is God save the LORD? or who is a rock save our God?

Psalms 62:2 He only is my rock and my salvation; he is my defence; I shall not be greatly moved.

Psalms 62:6-7 He only is my rock and my salvation: he is my defence; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God.

1 Corinthians 10:4 And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.

1 Peter 2:8 And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.

Some will bring up the verses referring to the Apostles and Prophets as the "foundation of the church," based upon Ephesians 2:20, and thus claim the 'rock' referred to in verse 18, applies to the apostles and prophets, and thus Peter in verse 16 of Matthew 18:

And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;

But, Lord Jesus Christ is the significant "Rock," the "Chief corner stone" of the church. The others are "ΠΕΤΡΟΣ" 'fragments' or "stones" that make up the foundation, and further, the born-again, immersed believers are the lively stones (1 Peter 2:5); one cannot help but believe that the Holy Spirit had Peter's conversation with Jesus in mind when He gave those Words to Peter in 1 Peter 2:5. We are the little stones (fragments), "lively stones," that make up the "spiritual house," the church. But, church members are not to be equated with the foundation stones (fragments), the apostles and prophets, who were "holy men of God" who were moved along by the Holy Spirit and who recorded the inspired Scriptures that are not of private interpretation (2 Peter 1:20-21). That is: 'No man added to, subtract from, or changed the Words breathed out by God.' They are recorded exactly as He wanted them. The Words given to the apostles and prophets were not 'interpreted' by the apostles and prophets and then recorded.

In reference to Matthew 16:18, even the father of the Roman Catholic Church, Augustine (354-430 AD), got it. He said:

"It was not said to him, 'Thou art a rock (*petra*),' but, 'Thou art Peter,' and the Rock was Christ"⁷

Chrysostom (347-407 AD) as well as others such as Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, etc. affirm this exegesis: That **Jesus was the Rock** upon which the Church would be built (future tense) in Matthew 16:18. The "confession" mentioned in the quote *below* is from the preceding two verses (Matthew 16:16-17) when Peter confesses that Jesus is the "Christ," who is the Messiah, the Rock:

Thus St. Chrysostom, "Upon this **rock**, that is, on the faith of his **confession** [Jesus is the Christ]. Hereby he signifies that many were now on the point of believing, and raises his spirit, and makes him a shepherd." To the same purport might be quoted Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory Nyss., Cyril, and others.⁸ [my emphasis]

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¹ *St. Matthew Vol. II*. 1909 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.). *The Pulpit Commentary* (134–136). London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Robertson, A. (1933). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Mt 16:18–20). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press as an example.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Vincent, M. R. (1887). *Word studies in the New Testament* (Mt 16:18–19). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. Also, see Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

⁷ Op. Cit., "*The Pulpit Commentary*."

⁸ *Ibid.*