

# Christ's Use of Rock Symbolism in Matthew 16:13-20

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(13) When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

(14) They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

(15) "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

(16) Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

(17) Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. (18) And I tell you that you are Peter [*petros*], and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. (19) I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (20) Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. (Matt 16:13-20)

## Introduction

A history of doctrinal opinion on Matt 16:18 would go beyond the scope of a brief paper such as this one. According to W.F. Albright and C. F. Mann, "There is no passage in the gospels which has been more discussed than this, especially with reference to vs.17-19.<sup>1</sup> Here I merely point out that not all Roman Catholics have taught that Peter is the rock on which the church is built in vs.18 and more recently not all Protestants have taught that it is Christ.<sup>2</sup>

I submit that the only reason why Peter could say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (vs.17), is because it was true. This fact is the basis for Peter's confession and must provide the starting point for our discussion of it. Jesus really is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Of course the truth about Christ remains true whether we say so or not. In and of itself, however, such truth will save no one. Otherwise it would save everyone. It must be accepted into the heart and once accepted it must be expressed.

In both acceptance and expression Peter has given the church a worthy example. And yet what makes the church a Christian body is the fact that Christ and no other is its "chosen and precious cornerstone" (1Pet 2:6). This fact is so clear from other passages that we should ask if something of Christ's intent has not been missed in the historic church's interpretation of the words, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18).

Jesus is Lord independently of whether we also realize He is Lord. But the truth about Christ can benefit a person only as it is acknowledged to be true and made a part of one's life.

"For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Rom 10:9-10). Indeed one important reason for the existence of the church referred to in Matt 16:18 is to maintain just this sort of public witness to Christ in an otherwise unbelieving world.<sup>3</sup> We have been entrusted with things that are not only true, but which need to be said. Peter was blessed because he refused to limit his thinking to what was earthly but was led by the Holy Spirit to confess the deity of Christ. Our emphasis as exegetes now must remain the same as Peter's was then or we will surely miss the point he was making--and the point Christ was making.

The above position rests on more than sectarian bias. It has a solid foundation in the literary structure of the passage. Below I examine vs.18 in its context and outline vss.13-20. It is a straightforward procedure. But when we have done it a clear answer will emerge to what for many people has been a difficult problem. If the passage before us seems like a peculiarly Catholic passage, it is only because Protestants have given it away. If Matt 16:13-20 were generally and correctly understood we would hear sermons on it from Protestant pulpits. It is not enough to say quietly to ourselves that vs.18 fails to support what our Catholic friends attempt to draw from it. After we have said what it does not mean we should then go on to show what it does mean. This is what I hope to do in the present paper.

## The Lexical Argument

The problem of defending the Protestant position on lexical grounds is explored under four headings, where each builds on the one before it. (1) "Peter" means "rock." (2) It is true that "Peter" means "rock," but two different words (*petros, petra*) are used in the Greek. (3) It is true that two different Greek words are used, but it is inconceivable that Christ would have spoken Greek to His mostly Galilean disciples, and all the more since this was a private conversation. The conversation was in Aramaic and thus the same word *kēpā* would have been used in both places. (4) It is undoubtedly true, as claimed, that Christ was speaking Aramaic in the above conversation and that He used the same word for "rock" twice in the two clauses that have become Matt 16:18, but this fact does not prove He intended to convey the same thought both times. A word can be used in more than one sense. Thus, the lexical argument is inconclusive.

At issue is whether Christ wished to convey two meanings or one by saying what He did, i.e., whether the relationship between "Peter" in vs.18a and "rock" in vs.18b is one of similarity or contrast. Catholics generally take the former position, while Protestants take the latter. But when we are through looking behind the English to the Greek, and behind the written Greek to the spoken Aramaic, what we see is that context is the final arbiter after all and we had that much to begin with. What Maas has said is substantially correct, as regards Christ's choice of words in vs.18, but there are more factors to deal with than he has invited us to consider.

The proposed solution is that the Protestant position is the correct one but that its correctness cannot be established until we go beyond lexical or syntactic issues. The argument from a spoken Aramaic original does not contradict the Protestant position, but it does not contradict the Catholic position either. That is the problem. It simply does not provide crucial evidence either way. But there is an argument which does provide crucial evidence. Bear in mind that the conversation before us--which, as Maas points out, took place originally in Aramaic--encompasses more than two words set in two clauses (or one word set in two

clauses). To understand what Christ said on this occasion we must consider all of what He said, how His disciples responded, and the interplay between question and response as they talked. We must take vs.18 in its context. When we have done this Christ's intent in speaking as He did will be abundantly clear.

"Peter" means "rock"

In a marginal note to Matt 16:18 the New International Version (NIV) translators correctly state that, "*Peter* means *rock*." The problem is not that the note says what it does, but that it stops without saying more. Greek *petros* ("Peter") does indeed mean "rock." Greek *petra* means "rock." Greek *lithos* means "rock." There are other Greek words that mean "rock."<sup>4</sup> But while there are some elements of meaning that all the above words have in common, there are others that distinguish them. There are some situations where only *petra* would be appropriate and others where one would only use *lithos*. So it is not enough to tell one's readers that "*Peter* means *rock*." If we say only this much and nothing more, the effect is misleading. Taking the above footnote as our only source of information we could easily conclude that, since "Peter" and "rock" have the same sense, they must also have the same reference, and that consequently Peter is the "rock" on which Christ intended to build His church. Even those who accept the above implication as true will agree that NIV's note prejudices the question.

Two words are used in Greek

In the Greek of Matt 16:18 there are two words that mean "rock." The first one is masculine (*petros*), the second feminine (*petra*). Thus, while it is appropriate to begin by stating that the word "Peter" means "rock," one should immediately add that *petros* in the first clause contrasts with *petra* in the second. If there two words rather than one, the reader should be aware of the possibility that they might have two different referents. Thus, the NIV note should be expanded to read, e.g., "Peter (Greek *petros*) means rock (Greek *petra*)."

As early as Homer there was already a contrast between feminine *petrē* (corresponding to later *petra*) and masculine *petros*. According to Georg Autenrieth the Homeric word *petrē* was used in reference to a "rock, cliff, [or] reef", whereas *petros* meant a "piece of rock, [or] stone."<sup>5</sup> At a later time, in the Greek Old Testament or Septuagint, feminine *petra* corresponds to both *śela*<sup>c</sup> and *śūr*, *lithos* corresponds to the common Hebrew word *ʿēben*, and masculine *petros* does not occur at all.<sup>6</sup> In the Greek New Testament masculine *petros* is used only as the name of an individual--Simon Peter (the Greek form of the name) or Cephas (the Aramaic form).<sup>7</sup> Masculine *petros* is obviously not a high-frequency word but the semantic range that would normally have belonged to it in both testaments appears to have been taken over by *lithos*. Thus, the distinction between common rock in movable form (*petros*) and stones on which effort of some sort has been expended (*lithos*) is not preserved in the New Testament. The only place where *petros* is used in its original meaning is a passage which explains the meaning of the name "Peter": "'You will be called Cephas [*kēpā*]' (which, when translated, is Peter [*petros*])" (John 1:42). But, whatever the frequency of use, two different words meaning "rock" are used in Matt 16:18--the one masculine, the other feminine.

One word is used in Aramaic

The fact that the words *petros* "Peter" and *petra* "rock" are different and distinct should be pointed out intelligently. When misused this fact, which is correct in itself, opens the way for a very powerful counterargument.

Christ's native language was not Greek but a Galilean dialect of Aramaic.<sup>8</sup> Many of His disciples also came from Galilee.<sup>9</sup> Thus, there can be no doubt that the above conversation, which was a private exchange between Christ and His disciples, took place in Aramaic rather than Greek. Moreover there is early and consistent evidence that when Matthew first issued his gospel--the only one that records this particular conversation--it was written in Aramaic.<sup>10</sup> Only later was it translated into Greek. Thus, while the Semitic context for Christ's words must be kept in view at all times, it is especially important to do this when dealing with passages from the gospel of Matthew.<sup>11</sup>

The learned Roman Catholic commentator A. J. Maas lays the above point under heavy emphasis. The reason why he is at pains to do so is that in Aramaic there is no lexical distinction that would correspond to the difference in Greek between masculine *petros* and feminine *petra*. Only one word, meaning "rock" or "stone," would have been used in both clauses. Thus, he argues, the reference in both clauses is to Peter.

. . . in the Greek and the Latin text the word expressing "rock" is masculine in the first place, and feminine in the second (*Petrus, petra; petros, petra*). But since Jesus spoke Aramaic, all difficulty vanishes, there being only one word (*kp* or *kyp*). The Greek writer (and the Latin translator followed him) saw that the feminine noun could not well be employed as the name of Simon, while the masculine noun agreed less with the idea of foundation-stone or firm rock (see, however, Hom. H..270,.283,.411; Pind. Nem. xi.26; Sophocl. Oed. c.19, 1595; Philoct. 272; Diod. Sic. i.32), a meaning expressed by the feminine form [cf. Grot.].<sup>12</sup>

It is true, as Maas points out, that Christ would have used only one word for "rock" in both clauses of Matt 16:18. Nor can there be any doubt what the word was. Five times Paul refers to Simon as Peter (Gal 1:18; 2:7, 8, 11, 14), using the Greek form of the name, and five times as Cephas (1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Gal 2:9), using the Aramaic form.<sup>13</sup> Cephas is merely a Hellenized form of Aramaic *kēpā* "rock." This is the word Christ would have used in both parts of vs.18.

If only one word for "rock" in the spoken Aramaic underlies the Greek forms *petros* and *petra* of the written gospel, the conclusion Maas draws, i.e., that Peter (*kēpā/petros*) is the foundation stone (*kēpā/petra*) on which Christ would build His church, appears to be unanswerable. It rests on admitted facts that not everyone has taken into account and thus appears to preclude the Protestant argument by removing the factual bases on which it is advanced. But Maas stops too soon. The argument must be taken one step further.

The lexical argument is inconclusive

Maas argues that the reason why two different Greek words for "rock" are used in Matt 16:18 is that the Greek language imposes a distinction of genders on the translator of Matthew's Aramaic gospel from which he cannot extract himself. Then, from the difference in

genders, there follows a gratuitous difference in meanings. In Aramaic, on the other hand, the problem of genders does not arise and so the difference in word meanings cannot follow from it. Hence, the reference in both clauses is to Peter.

It is a powerful argument, but we must notice very carefully what Maas has and has not demonstrated. What he has demonstrated is that a lexical argument cannot be used against him. What he has not demonstrated is that the point he wishes to draw from this fact is true. The real crux is whether Peter is referred to in both clauses, not whether he might be. There are two things here and we must keep them separate. Maas has not proved he is right, only that the argument from word meanings cannot be used to prove he is wrong. In a similar manner it cannot be used to prove the Protestant position is wrong because a word can be used in more than one way. A change of tone can alter one's meaning entirely when speaking, but a reader would not have such information. Ultimately, therefore, the lexical argument proves nothing either way. It is inconclusive. If there is an argument capable of establishing Christ's intent, we must look elsewhere for it.

By saying this I do not wish to imply that the available textual evidence is inadequate. On the contrary, my position is that we should consider much more of it than before. We should consider all of what Christ said on this occasion and not confine ourselves to an isolated sentence. And we should listen to the other side of the conversation as well. When we have done this it will be possible for us to know exactly what thought Christ wished to convey in vs.18.

## The Structural Argument

Up to this point we have approached Christ's words, precisely, as a body of words and have discussed only those found within a single sentence. We now broaden the perspective to include all of the narrative from which that sentence was drawn.

The conversation between Christ and His disciples recorded in Matt 16:13-20 consists roughly of two questions (vss.13, 15), two answers (vss.14, 16), and a subsequent response. The response in turn consists of a blessing (vs.17-18), a promise (vs.19), and a command (vs.20). The passage is outlined in text exhibit 1.

## Text Exhibit 1

## Questions and Answers

## Question 1

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (vs.13)

## Answer 1

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." (vs.14)

## Question 2

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" (vs.15)

## Answer 2

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (vs.16)

## Response

## Blessing

(17) Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. (18) And I tell you that you are Peter [*petros*], and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. (vss.17-18)

## Promise

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (vs.19)

## Command

Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. (vs.20)

Actually the structure of the conversation is a bit more detailed than the structure of the outline would suggest at this point. We have divided the text into rows. We must now divide it into columns.

First part of the conversation:  
questions and answers

The questions Christ raises call attention first to the views of the multitude and then to the views of His disciples. The answers he receives are correspondingly diverse. The general question gets a general answer: "They replied..." The question as to the views of the inner circle of disciples is answered by a single individual: "Simon Peter answered,..."

At this point it will be useful to expand the outline by placing the conversation on a two-dimensional grid, with columns as well as rows. In one column we have the party responsible for a given view and in the other column a summary of the view itself. See text exhibit 2.

Text Exhibit 2

Column 1: Persons	Column 2: Positions
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Question 1

(13) When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say	the Son of Man is?"
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Answer 1

(14) They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say	Elijah;
and still others,	Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Question 2

(15) "But what about you?" he asked. Who do you say	I am?"
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Answer 2

(16) Simon Peter answered,	"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
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Throughout this part of the conversation there is a purposeful and overt contrast between the one speaking and the words spoken. In vs. 14 the words "Some," "others," and "still others" stand opposite "John the Baptist," "Elijah," and "Jeremiah or one of the prophets," respectively.<sup>14</sup> Two different categories of information are represented.

Coming now to vs.16, the person who speaks is Simon Peter. Thus, "Simon Peter" goes in the first column along with "Some," "others," and "still others." The view he expresses is that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." This information goes in the second column alongside "John the Baptist," "Elijah," and "Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Second part of the conversation:  
response

*Blessing.* When Peter goes on to confess Christ's deity and is blessed for doing so, all of the above distinctions still apply. Once more there is a contrast between the one who speaks and the substance of what he says. See text exhibit 3.

Text Exhibit 3

Column 1: Persons	Column 2: Positions
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Blessing

(17) Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah,	for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.
(18) And I tell you that you are Peter,	and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

In vs. 17 Christ pronounces a blessing on "you, Simon son of Jonah." He then goes on to say that "'this,'"<sup>15</sup> i.e., the substance of what Peter said, did not originate in Peter's own mind or by any other natural process: "for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (vs.17). Christ came, lived, and worked on earth as a man among men; the fact that He was also more than a man was not obvious to His contemporaries from any distinguishing feature of His physical appearance (Isa 53:2). Christ did not lay aside divinity when He took on human flesh, but did freely lay aside all outward trappings of divinity (Phil 2:6).<sup>16</sup> Thus, for anyone to realize that Jesus was the divine Son of God, the Father had to reveal the fact (Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22). That is vs.17.

In vs.18a Christ goes on to say, "And I tell you that you are Peter [*petros*]." This much belongs in the first column, along with "Simon son of Jonah." When He then says, "and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my church," context demands that this second clause be placed in the second column corresponding to the earlier supplied word "this." The reference in vs.18b is not to Peter but to the substance of Peter's remarks, including his factual basis for them. The contrast between persons and the positions they hold has been building ever since vs.13 and now, at the critical moment, it cannot possibly be avoided.

Christ does not have Peter in mind as He speaks of founding His church on solid rock in Matt 16 any more than He has Peter in mind when He makes the same point using similar language in Matt7. The wise builder is the one who "built his house on the rock [*petra*]" (Matt 7:24). In the parable the contrast is not between a large *petra* and a small *petros* but between bedrock (*petra*) and sand (*ammon*). Two different Aramaic words are used (*kēpā*, *hālā*). I submit that Christ is the Rock referred to in both chapters. "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:11).

In one sense we could say that the rock on which Christ would build His church is Peter's confession of the deity of Christ. Such an answer would be correct to a degree. But the



fact that Peter said what he did is not what protects the church against "the gates of Hades" (vs.18b). Inherent within this very promise is a warning that if the church's confession of Christ should become sullied in some way, the blessings that follow from its once-pure faith would no longer apply. The church's safety is inseparably linked to the manner and degree in which its faith lays hold on Christ as Peter's did in the passage under review.<sup>17</sup> Maas has correctly stated that

The Church is really based on the divinity of Jesus Christ, is sustained by the profession of this truth, has always upheld this belief, and is one by this profession.<sup>18</sup>

The church has had a widely varied past and yet one could agree that broadly speaking it has always professed the deity of Christ, barring now an occasional heresy. The very truth of this fact, however, could lead us to repeat an especially dangerous error that we normally associate with ancient Israel. "When such a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, 'I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way'" (Deut 29:19). It is possible to misinterpret God's blessings (Matt 3:9). He alone is trustworthy and we must persist in clinging to Him. When we do, we are secure. But my point is that receiving a blessing from God confers no independent security.

This is the lesson to be learned from biblical rock symbolism. It is not only that God is trustworthy, but that we must trust in Him. Nor is such symbolism confined to an isolated passage. The Bible is filled with it.<sup>19</sup> So the context for what Christ says in Matt 16 is not limited to that chapter. After discussing the words of the one verse and the structure of the one passage we must go further and ask what point lies behind the use of biblical rock symbolism in general. When we do it will be clear that the Rock on which the church is built is not Peter and that it is more than Peter's confession of Christ's deity. It is Christ Himself. "In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph 2:21).

*Promise.* Following the blessing of vs.18 is a promise of apostolic authority. The word "you" in vs.19 is singular. See text exhibit 4.

#### Text Exhibit 4

##### Promise

(19) I will give you [soi] the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

If and to the extent that we find ourselves shying away from the implications of apostolic authority contained in Matt 16:19, we do not understand the passage. What Christ says here should not be minimized. At the same time, however, it should not be carelessly interpreted. The next bloc of verses, where another conversation between Jesus and Peter takes place, will serve to illustrate this point (vss.21-23).

The context for what Christ says to Peter in vs.19 is what Peter says to Christ in vs.17. There is nothing in Peter that would merit the blessing of vs.18. In the same way, and by way of illustrating this same point, there is nothing in Peter that

could explain the rebuke of vs.23 (see below), which is easily the sternest in all the Bible. In both the blessing of vs.18 and the rebuke of vs.23 Peter's words must be allowed to interpret the response they get.

(21) From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

(22) Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

(23) Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." (Matt 16:21- 23)

When Peter confesses Christ's deity he receives a blessing. When he attempts to divert Christ's attention from the cross, toward which His whole life is oriented, he receives a withering rebuke. The same man is speaking on both occasions. Only what he says is different. So any application that focuses on the person of Peter--not only in vss.13-20 but also in vs.21-23--must prove inadequate. The point to emphasize in both passages is the content of Peter's words. When we do this both passages make sense. Otherwise they appear to contradict each other.

The solution I have proposed is simple and reasonable and it explains more than just the above two passages. Later, at Christ's trial, Peter would deny Christ with cursing (Matt 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:56-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27). This is not the stability required of a foundation stone (vs.18)--if the church is founded on Peter. Still later he would vacillate in accepting Gentile Christians at Antioch (Gal 2:11-21). This is not the one to whom Gentiles would want to look for their sure entrance into the kingdom of God (vs.19)--if Peter is the sole holder of its keys.

The blessing of Matt 16:19 is consistent with all such human failings, when we understand that blessing correctly. The keys to the kingdom are the words of Christ and they remain true however false we might prove to be. With such keys Peter and the other disciples could open heaven to any who accepted their spoken message, as at Pentecost when 3000 were converted in a day (Acts 2:14-41).

We must not remove the element of authority from what Christ says in vs.19. It is there. But we must remember what it is based on. The apostolic authority of vs.19 derives from the apostolic confession of vs.17. Any church that maintains such a confession in its purity will be unassailable so long as it does so. If the confession wavers, so does the church's grant of authority and its promise of security. There is a condition to be met when applying either the blessing or the rebuke and it is the same condition in both cases.<sup>20</sup> The church's well-being follows entirely from its willingness to accept Christ without wavering or compromise--in the humility of His cross as well as the glory of His deity. Thus, He is one both with us and with His Father. Both elements must be present before either can benefit us. When we acknowledge both equally nothing can harm us and, more than this, we are enabled to do effective work for other souls. There is nothing here that needs to be deemphasized.

*Command.* The conversation ends as it began, with a discussion of how Christ's work is generally perceived. The disciples were not to make public use of the term "Christ" (or "Messiah") just then, because there were so many preconceptions in the minds of their hearers

that it would be impossible for such words to convey a right impression. Barring this, they would convey a wrong impression and be positively harmful. See text exhibit 5.

#### Text Exhibit 5

#### Command

(20) Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

One reason for using words at all is to convey a thought. If they convey the wrong thought, they are the wrong words. This principle has lasting value. We should apply it today, and not only out of expediency but in response to the command of Christ. We should ensure that our words are correctly understood and choose words that can be.

## Discussion

In this section I review selected examples of rock symbolism from the Old Testament, the writings of Peter, and the writings of Paul.

#### Old Testament applications of rock symbolism

It will not be possible to deal with Old Testament rock symbolism in any detail here.<sup>21</sup> But consider the following representative examples.

"See, I lay a stone in Zion,  
a tested stone,  
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;  
the one who trusts will never be dismayed."  
(Isa 28:16)

The stone the builders rejected  
has become the capstone. (Ps 118:22)

(13) "The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as  
holy,  
he is the one you are to fear,  
he is the one you are to dread,  
(14) and he will be a sanctuary;  
but for both houses of Israel he will be  
a stone that causes that causes men to stumble  
and a rock that makes them fall.  
And for the people of Jerusalem he will be  
a trap and a snare." (Isa 8:13-14)

The above passages ascribe to God the qualities of trustworthiness and stability. By contrast mankind is compared on the one hand to grass that endures only for a short time (Psa 103:13-18; Isa 40:6-8; see also Matt 6:30 [=Luke 12:28]; Jas 1:10-11)<sup>22</sup> and on the other hand to sheep who turn aside so quickly from their shepherd (Isa 53:6). The thrust of what is being said with these comparisons is that while God is reliable, we are not. It is as the song says, "We are weak but He is strong." It is of special interest that Peter himself goes out of his way to make this same point (1 Pet 1:24-25).

### Petrine applications of rock symbolism

The events discussed in this paper occurred early in Peter's experience. Over the next thirty years he had ample time to reflect on them. In his first epistle to the church, where Peter records the flower of his mature insights for posterity, he again speaks by the Holy Spirit and in doing so he again directs all possible attention to Christ.

(4) As you come to him, the living Stone [*lithon zōnta*]- rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-(5) you also, like living stones [*lithoi zōntes*], are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 2:4-5)

Peter here makes use of the same figure that Christ had used earlier in giving him the name "Peter" (or "Cephas") and applies the thought behind it to all who would make the same confession that he had made.<sup>23</sup> Peter sees himself as one living stone laid on the sure foundation of Christ. And now "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house..." (vs.5). He continues:

(6) For in Scripture it says:

"See I lay a stone [*lithon*] in Zion,  
a chosen and precious cornerstone [*akrogōniaion*],  
and the one who trusts in him  
will never be put to shame." [Isa 28:16]

(7) Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

"The stone [*lithos*] the builders rejected  
has become the capstone [*kephalēn gōnias*],"  
[Ps 118:22]

(8) and,

"A stone [*lithos*] that causes men to stumble  
and a rock [*petran*] that makes them fall."  
[Isa 8:14]

They stumble because they disobey the message--which is also what they were destined for. (1 Pet 2:6-8)

Notice carefully that Peter is here interpreting the passage under review. I submit that he has the earlier conversation with Christ in mind as he writes. He sees himself as a "living stone" (vs.5), as in Matt 16:18a, but admits that he is only one among many. The great Foundation on which all such stones are placed is another different "living Stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious" (vs.4), as in Matt 16:18b. Peter does not imply that the church is built on him. On the contrary, he and the body of believers in every age build their faith on Christ. Any attempt to apply the foundation-stone figure of Matt 16:18 to Peter flies in the face of his own understanding of the passage.

Peter's use of rock symbolism is unique in a number of ways. He refers to it more extensively and more explicitly than other New Testament writers and he appeals to a broader spectrum of Old Testament support. He draws on the analogy of a spiritual temple but says nothing about himself in this regard, except that his basis for faith is the same as that of every other Christian. What he insists on talking about is Jesus and he returns to this point no fewer than four different times, citing Ps 118:22 in two verses (4, 7), Isa 28:16 in three verses (4, 6, 7), and Isa 8:14 in one verse (8). For Peter, applying the Old Testament's various Rock passages to Christ had become a favorite point of exegesis.

### Pauline applications of rock symbolism

Paul was just as clear on the nature of the church's Foundation as Peter was. Both men had the same point to make. They might have disagreed about other things, but not about this. Many long years before the incarnation Israel "drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:4). Elsewhere Paul writes,

(10) By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. (11) For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 3:10-11)

Paul learned by hard experience that he could place no confidence in himself. He writes, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (1 Cor 11:30). This is precisely the lesson that biblical rock symbolism is designed to teach.

### Discussion

Peter also, though appearing strong, was actually weak and unstable--like the sand in the parable of the two builders (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49). It took time for him to realize this fact. But when he did, he took the matter to heart and built his faith securely on Christ. We as exegetes should benefit from Peter's experience. We should focus our attention where he did. Then we will be able to grasp the point that he carried away from his earlier conversation with Christ.

The reason why the lexical argument is inconclusive in Matt 16:18 is because Jesus had two different things in mind as He spoke. He used the same Aramaic word twice, but was referring to different objects as He did so. The proof is that Peter understood Him in this way. Something in Christ's manner must have conveyed the impression that Peter received. We do not know what it was. But we do have tangible evidence of the results.

So there is the matter of what Christ said in relation to what the disciples (especially Peter) said--the structure of the conversation. And there is also the matter of how the disciples (especially Peter) understood Him. This is a facet of the topic that Maas should have brought to our attention. Doing so would have made his conclusions impossible, but with whatever implications, we must take Peter's own understanding of Christ's words fully into account if we wish to understand them ourselves.

## Conclusion

Encouraging people to build their faith on Christ is something Protestants should be eager to do. In the passage before us all the issues are raised. It is an ideal vehicle for developing this thought and bringing it home to the heart. It is a passage we should preach, having once understood it ourselves.

We must be very clear, however, that merely maintaining orthodox belief on the deity of Christ is not the sum of what Christ commends Peter for in Matt 16:18. There must be an inner emphasis on Christ as well. We must not only believe that Jesus is Lord; we must say so. And to do this our spiritual priorities must be such that this fact is at some point the one thing we most want to talk about. Otherwise different words will form and the truths that Peter was commended for expressing openly will be relegated to the status of cherished assumptions and background information underlying other important truths.

There are indeed other topics that are worthwhile and beneficial, even essential, for the church to preach. But my point is that Christ must be the focus of our faith. Here is the root of the church's security. It does no good to cherish the factual truths of Christology, as formulated at Chalcedon and other early ecumenical councils, if, while continuing to agree that these things are true, the church allows its attention to be diverted for all practical purposes to the role of a human priesthood on earth. "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder" (Jas 2:19).

So having once agreed that Christ founded His church on the merits of His own life, death, and resurrection, we have not yet gotten all the instruction we might hope to receive from Matt 16:13-20. Allowing the passage to revolve around Peter rather than what Peter said about Christ shows that we "do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matt 16:23). Under this reversal the church loses the basis for its security and lays itself open not only to the possibility but to the certainty of failure. Let no one remain in any doubt. Christ is the Rock on which His church is built and the great center around which all Scripture and right Christian faith revolves.

Here is the Holy Spirit's topic. When He speaks, this is what He loves to say. Peter, toward the end of his life, gives evidence that he has grasped this all-important point and taken it into his heart. He considered himself to be only one living stone among many. The next person to make a confession similar to his would become the next living stone to take its place on the foundation of Christ and from that time to this there have been countless others who have opened their hearts to Jesus and given public expression to their faith. Here, in the glad acknowledgement of Christ's supreme lordship and deity, is the defining characteristic of membership in the Christian church and the means by which any child of humanity can gain full and free entrance into the kingdom of God.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

<sup>1</sup>*Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), p.195.

<sup>2</sup>For discussion see A. J. Maas, S. J., *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew with an Explanatory and Critical Commentary*, 4th ed. (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1928; first published 1898), pp.181-83. Among views held by Catholics are that the Rock on which the church was to be built is: (a) Christ, (b) Peter's confession of faith concerning Christ, (c) Peter himself, (d) the apostles generally (Rev 21:14), (e) the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20), and (f) the entire body of the faithful, i.e., those who accept Peter's confession of faith concerning Christ. (ibid.) ". . . among the learned Protestants of more recent times Bengel, Kuinoel, Rosenmüller, Dodwell, Michaelis, Parkhurst, Fritzsche, Bloomfield, Alford, Mansel, Holtzmann, Weiss, Meyer regard the rock of the Church as identical with the person of Peter" (ibid., p. 183). To this list we can now add Albright and Mann (Matthew, p.195). For a sampling of pre-Reformation sources see *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers* by S. Thomas Aquinas, vol. 1: St. Matthew, part 2, 2nd ed. (Oxford and London: John Henry and James Parker et al., 1864), pp. 584-86.

<sup>3</sup>The book *Acts of the Apostles* by Ellen G. White opens with the following paragraph: "The church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world. From the beginning it has been God's plan that through His church shall be reflected to the world His fullness and His sufficiency. The members of the church, those whom He has called out of darkness into His marvelous light, are to show forth His glory. The church is the repository of the riches of the grace of Christ; and through the church will eventually be made manifest, even to 'the principalities and powers in heavenly places,' the final and full display of the love of God. Ephesians 3:10," ([Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1911], p.9).

<sup>4</sup>See Hardy, "The Old Testament Basis for New Testament Rock Symbolism," *Historicism* No. 4/Oct 85, pp. 16-38.

<sup>5</sup>*A Homeric Dictionary for Schools and Colleges*, trans. Robert P. Keep, rev. Isaac Flagg (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), p. 231. By this description *petrē* in Homeric Greek would be comparable to Hebrew *śēla* or *śūr*, whereas *petros* in Homeric Greek would be comparable to Hebrew *ʾēben*. The one was attached, the other capable of being moved. This is the sense that Ellen G. White gives to Peter's name as well: "The word Peter signifies a stone,--a rolling stone. Peter was not the rock upon which the church was founded. The gates of hell did prevail against him when he denied his Lord with cursing and swearing. The church was built upon One against whom the gates of hell could not prevail" (*Desire of Ages* [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940; originally published, 1898], p. 413). In another place she states that, "The word 'Peter' signifies a loose stone. Christ did not refer to Peter as being the rock upon which He would found His church. His expression 'this rock,' applied to Himself as the foundation of the Christian church" (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 [Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1956], p. 1095). Ellen White does not claim that motion is part of the meaning of "Peter" (*petros*), but rather that the type of rock referred to had the capability of motion--thus her comment that the word means a "loose stone," i.e., a stone which is not attached, a type of stone other than bedrock. This is indeed the essential contrast between *petros* and *petra*, and between Hebrew *ʾēben* on the one hand and *śēla* or *śūr* on the other (see Hardy, "Rock Symbolism," p.16). In *Desire of Ages* and again in *SDA Bible Commentary* vol. 5 Ellen White was not speaking as a lexicographer. But what she said is consistent with those who are.

<sup>6</sup>See Hardy, "The Old Testament Basis for New Testament Rock Symbolism," *Historicism* No. 4/Oct 85, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup>On Greek *petros* as a translation from Aramaic *kēpā* see F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 53(2e). The Aramaic form of the name "Peter" is "Cephas" (John 1:42; 1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Gal 2:9). All but one of the above references to "Cephas" is in Paul's writings. Early references to "Peter" include: Matt 4:18; 8:14; 10:2; 14:28-29; 15:15; 16:16; Mark 3:16; 5:37; 8:29; Luke 5:8; 6:14; 8:45, 51; 9:20; John 1:40, 44; 6:8, 68.

<sup>8</sup>See Matthew Black, "Aramaic Studies and the Language of Jesus," in Matthew Black and Georg Fohrer, eds., *In Memoriam Paul Kahle* (Berlin: Topelmann, 1968), pp.17-28; Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, "The Contribution of Qumran Aramaic to the Study of the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 20 (1973-74): 382-407; idem, "The Aramaic Language and the Study of the New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980): 5-21. See also the introduction to Frank Zimmermann, *The Aramaic Origin of the Four Gospels* (New York: Ktav, 1979), pp.3-23. In Zimmermann's book the polemic of Judeo-Christian differences is laid aside and the Aramaic language spoken by Jesus is allowed to emerge as a heritage common to both traditions. It is a refreshing approach.

<sup>9</sup>Of the original twelve disciples only one (Judas Iscariot) can be securely identified with Judea. Peter and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew (=Nathaniel), Levi Matthew, and Simon the Zealot can all be associated with Galilee in some way. About Thomas, James the Less, and Jude (=Thaddaeus) we have no definite information. The name Iscariot (ܐܝܫ ܟܪܝܘܬ) means "man of Kerioth," which was a town in southern Judea close to Idumea or Edom. For a scholarly and useful guide to the dim borderland between history and tradition concerning these and other interesting persons from the church's past see John Coulson, ed., *The Saints: A Concise Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Guild Press, 1957).

<sup>10</sup>According to Alfred Wickenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1958), p.179-81, Papias of Hierapolis (c.130 A.D.), Irenaeus, Origen (d.254), and the church historian Eusebius (3.24.6) all maintain that Matthew was written first in Aramaic and only later translated into Greek. See also Zimmermann (*Aramaic Origin*, pp.33-82), who ignores secondary sources, instead going directly to the text for any residual evidences of translation. These he has documented in elaborate detail.

<sup>11</sup>The above fact does not make Syriac, in its various forms, a more reliable witness to Matthew's original intent than the Greek. While Matthew did not write in Greek at first, He did not write in Syriac either. Syriac is not the original language of the gospel, nor is it identical with the Galilean Aramaic that Jesus spoke, although Zimmermann refers to "proto-Syriac" in this connection. The fact remains that Syriac is a secondary witness (see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977], pp.3-98). Thus, the Semitic context for the gospel narratives must be kept not only in view but in balance.

<sup>12</sup>Matthew, pp. 181.

<sup>13</sup>The Hebrew word corresponding to Syriac *kēpā* is used in Job 30:6 (*w<sup>o</sup>kēpīm*) and Jer 4:29 (*ūbakkēpīm*).

<sup>14</sup>See Ross E. Winkle, "The Jeremiah Model for Jesus in the Temple," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 24 (1986): 155-72. Winkle points out that "both Jesus and Jeremiah preached in the temple, with the climax of their speeches being the alarming message that the temple would be abandoned by God" (*ibid.*, p.172).

<sup>15</sup>The word "this" is supplied. The Greek in vs. 17 reads: *sarx kai haima ouk apekalupsen soi* "flesh and blood did not reveal [this] to you." But the word *apokaluptō* "I reveal" is always transitive and the insertion proposed by the NIV translators is reasonable and necessary.



<sup>16</sup>On one occasion Christ prayed, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (John 17:5). Thus, He was with the Father before the world began and had been surrounded by glory at that time. But on earth, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2).

<sup>17</sup>See Hardy, "On the Vine Symbolism of Ezek 15," *Historicism* No.16/Oct 88, pp. 49-56.

<sup>18</sup>Maas, *Matthew*, p. 182. This is not the primary view that Maas holds.

<sup>19</sup>There is a vast amount of rock symbolism in the Old Testament, drawn from prose, poetry, and apocalyptic sources (see Hardy, "Rock Symbolism," pp. 16-23). New Testament uses of these materials is more focused. "Rock terminology used in the above passages consists of: Isa 8:14 (*ʿēben, pinnâ*); 20:16 (*ēben* [x2], *pinnâ, mûsād* [x2]; Ps 118:22 (*ʿēben, rōš pinnâ*); Exod 17:6 (*šûr* [x2]); Num 20:8, 10, 11 (*šēla* [x5]); and Dan 2:34-35, 45 (*ʿēben* [x3]). Thus, only six Old Testament passages representing nineteen individual uses of rock terminology in ten verses are cited by New Testament writers. There are eight New Testament passages in which the above verses are cited. These are: Matt 21:42-44; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17-18; Acts 4:11; Rom 9:32-33; 1 Cor 10:4; Eph 2:20; and 1 Pet 2:4-8. These eight passages contain twenty-four separate examples of New Testament rock terminology--divided among *lithos* (x13), *petra* (x4), *kephalē gōnias* (x5), and *akrogōniaios* (x2)" (*ibid.*, p.23). To this list should be added the word *petros* (see especially John 1:42; Matt 16:18).

<sup>20</sup>The vine symbolism found in Ezek 15 and elsewhere also contains an element of conditionality (see Hardy, "Vine Symbolism," p.55). In the above paper I speak of "mutuality" rather than "conditionality" (*ibid.*).

<sup>21</sup>See notes 6 and 19 above.

<sup>22</sup>See also Psa 37:1-2; 90:5-6; 129:5-7; Isa 37:27; 51:12-13. The Hebrew word used in all of the above examples is *hāšîr*. For other similar examples with *ʿēšeb* see Ps 92:6-8 [7-9]; 102:5, 11 [6, 12]; Isa 37:27.

<sup>23</sup>Notice that here, as in the non-extant Aramaic of Matt 16:18, only one word is used for both of the two very widely different meanings Peter is conveying in vss.4 and 5 (Greek *lithos*). The same is also true for vss.6-8.