



Matthew 16:18: The *Petros-petra* Wordplay—Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew? David N. Bivin

The pinnacle of the gospel drama may be Jesus' dramatic statement, "You are *Petros* and on this *petra* I will build my church." The saying seems to contain an obvious Greek wordplay, perhaps indicating that Jesus spoke in Greek. However, it is possible that "*Petros...petra*" is a Hebrew wordplay.^[1]

The recognition that the synoptic gospels are derived from a Semitic source or sources seems essential to any productive methodology of interpretation. Often, unless one translates the Greek texts of the synoptic gospels to Hebrew, one cannot fully understand their meaning. For example, when the Beatitudes are translated to Hebrew, one sees that they are not eschatological, but, like the beatitudes of the Hebrew Scriptures,^[2] speak of rewards in the here and now.

Greek Wordplay?

The Greek words πέτρος (*petros*) and πέτρα (*petra*) employed by Jesus in Matthew 16:18 make a nice wordplay. This Greek wordplay appears to be a direct contradiction to the assumption that Jesus taught in Hebrew. If Jesus delivered this saying in Hebrew, as many scholars in Israel assume, how could it have contained a Greek wordplay?

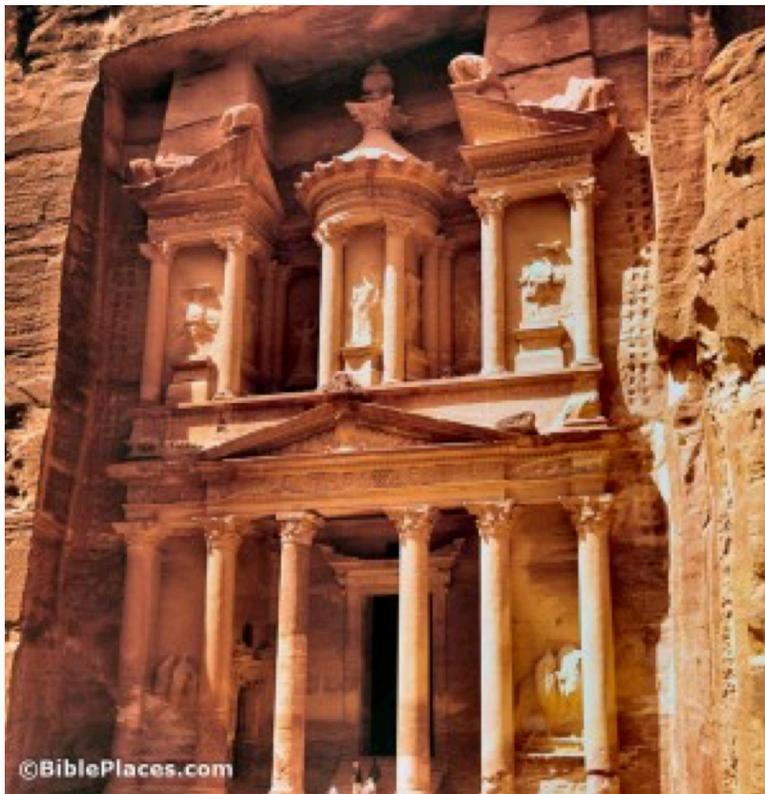
אלא עשה לא. הרבה במקומות וכן מים של בצים מוצא והיה תמליום ליתן ומבקש ויורד חופר היה. לבנות מבקש שהיה למלך משל יושב והיה העולם לבראות מבקש היה ה"הקב כך. ובנה תמליום ונתן בונה אני כאן אמר. פטרא למטה מוצא היה. אחר במקום חפר באברהם ה"הקב שצפה כיון? אותי ומכעיסין עומדין אלו ורשעים העולם את בורא אני היאך אמר. המבול ובדור אנוש בדור ומתבונן העולם את וליסד עליה לבנות פטרא מצאתי הרי אמר לעמוד שעתיד

It can be compared to a king who desired to build a palace. He began digging, searching for solid rock on which he could lay foundations, but he found only mire. He dug in several other sites, always with the same results. However, the king did not give up. He dug in still another location. This time he struck solid rock [*petra*].

“Here,” he said, “I will build,” and he laid foundations and built.

In the same manner, the Holy One, blessed is he, before he created the world, sat and examined the generation of Enosh and the generation of the Flood. “How can I create the world when those wicked people will appear and provoke me to anger?” he said.

When, however, the Holy One, blessed is he, saw Abraham, he said, “Here I have found solid rock [*petra*]^[11] on which I can build and upon which I can lay the world’s foundations.” (*Yalkut Shim’oni* to Num. 23:9)^[12]



Perhaps the tomb of a Nabatean king, the Khazneh (“Treasury”) is the most magnificent of Petra’s rock-carved structures. Dating from the first-second centuries A.D., this 130-foot-high façade carved out of rose-red Nubian sandstone occupies the lower part of a sheer cliff. Photo taken in 1965 by David Bivin. Copyright BiblePlaces.com

Yalkut Shim’oni is a very late (13th century A.D.) collection of midrash; however, it contains much early material.^[13] Some scholars might argue that this rabbinic source can tell us nothing about what a first-century Jewish sage may have said.^[14] Yet the similarity between Jesus’ declaration and the above midrash is too great to

be coincidental. It seems likely that Jesus alluded to a tradition with which his disciples were familiar, the tradition that God built the world on the sure foundation of a dependable man.

It appears that Jesus used his disciple’s unusual nickname to launch his teaching about the *petra* on which he would build. He took advantage of the similarity in meaning and sound between *Petros* and *petra* to hint at a tradition about Abraham. One can capture the flavor of Jesus’ statement with the translation, “You are Rocky, and on this bedrock I will build my community.”^[15]

***Petros*, a Hebrew Name**

Along with *petra*, *petros* entered the Hebrew language: Petros was the father of a sage of the land of Israel, Rabbi Yose ben Petros,^[16] who was active around 200-250 A.D., placing his father, Petros, as early as the second half of the second century A.D. There also was a town or village marketplace named Petros in the vicinity of Antipatris, near Lydda.^[17] Although there is still no unequivocal early occurrence of the Hebrew name Petros,^[18] these examples demonstrate that Hebrew speakers could borrow the Greek word *petros* and use it as a personal name.

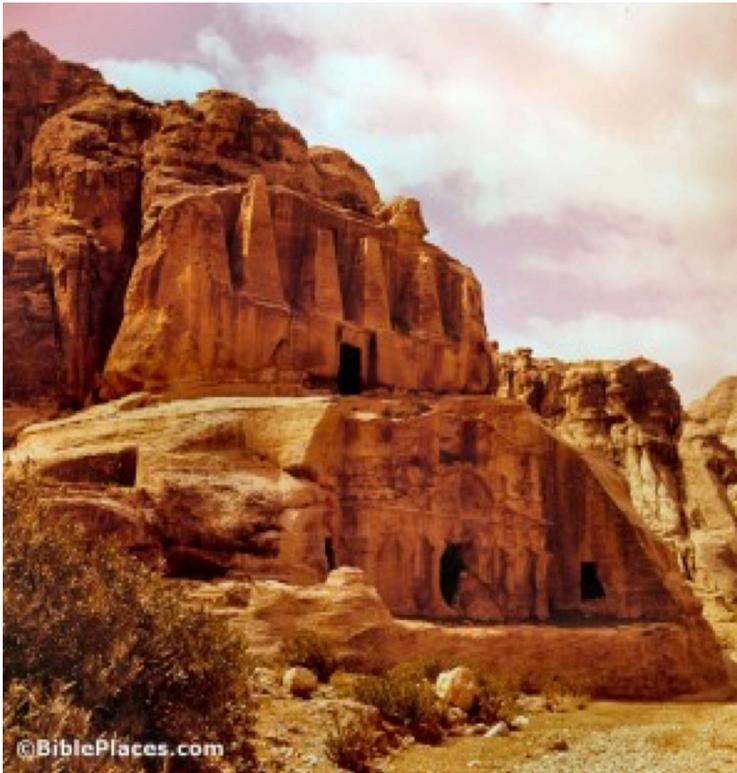
Apparently, Jesus' most prominent disciple bore two Hebrew names: שִׁמְעוֹן (Shim'on)^[19], and פֶּטְרוֹס (*Petros*), Peter's nickname.

“Cephas,” the Aramaic equivalent of the nickname “Petros,” seems to be the name by which Peter went in the Greek-speaking diaspora. Since Petros was not a Greek name, native Greek speakers would have been amused and distracted by the mention of a man named “stone.”

A Hebrew Hypothesis

A Hebrew hypothesis provides solutions to the difficulties raised by Fitzmyer's suggested reconstruction of Matthew 16:18: It preserves the *Petros-petra* wordplay that is reflected in Greek, a contrast between two different though related words; it permits one to reconstruct Jesus' saying using Petros, one of Peter's

names in the synoptic gospels; it lets Jesus speak in the language of contemporary Jewish sages—Hebrew.



Obelisk tomb, another of the rock-carved monuments at Petra, capital of the ancient Nabatean kingdom. Although much eroded by wind-blown sand, this façade, carved from the side of a cliff, give silent testimony to the magnificence that once was Petra's. Photo taken in 1965 by David Bivin. Copyright BiblePlaces.com

A Hebrew hypothesis can also explain why the name Petros is not attested in the Greek language until it is used in the New Testament.^[20] Provincials who spoke Greek as their second or third language borrowed the Greek word *petros* and used it as a personal name in their local language, Hebrew.^[21] Until it

appeared in Greek in the New Testament, the name Petros may have existed only in Hebrew.

Conclusion

Simply put, our argument is this: there is a rabbinic interpretation that contains the Greek loanword *petra*. Jesus' statement to Peter contains the word *petra*. The similarity of the two teachings is so great that coincidence seems improbable; it seems likely that Jesus alluded to the rabbinic interpretation. If so, he probably said *petra* in Hebrew. If *petra* is Hebrew, then Petros, which Jesus paired with *petra*, is probably Hebrew. The likelihood of this assumption is strengthened by the evidence from rabbinic sources: Hebrew speakers borrowed the Greek word *petros* and used it as a personal name. If the *Petros-petra* wordplay is Hebrew, then Jesus could have delivered his famous utterance to Peter in Hebrew.

[1] See my, "Hebraisms in the New Testament," *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (4 vols.; ed. Geoffrey Khan; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 198-201, and the JP version, "Hebraisms in the New Testament."

[2] For example, Ps. 1:1-3.

[3] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Aramaic Kepha' and Peter's name in the New Testament," *Text and Interpretation: Studies in the New Testament presented to Matthew Black*, ed. Ernest Best and R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 121-132. Fitzmyer suggests that in Aramaic Jesus said: *antah hu Kepha we'al kepha den ebneh...* (You are *Kepha* [Cephas], and on this *kepha* [rock] I will build...).

[4] Substituting the Greek masculine *petros* for the Greek feminine *petra*, the reading of all Greek manuscripts. See Fitzmyer, *ibid.*, pp. 130-131: "The problem that confronts one is to explain why there is in the Matthean passage a translation of the Aramaic substratum, which is claimed to have the same word *kepha* twice, by two Greek words, *πέτρος* and *πέτρα*... If the underlying Aramaic of Matt. xvi.18 had *kepha* twice, then we should expect σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ τούτῳ τῷ πέτρῳ οἰκοδομήσω..." Cf. Fitzmyer's recent comments in response to a magazine reader's letter ("Queries & Comments," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 19.3 [1993], 70). For Fitzmyer's Aramaic reconstruction to be correct, the Greek text should read, "on this *petros* I will build..."

[5] The word *כֶּפֶה* (*kepha*). The only difference between *Kepha* and *kepha* in Fitzmyer's reconstruction is the capitalization of the former. This distinction, however, does not exist in Aramaic, since in Aramaic there are no capital letters.

[6] Paul gives us eight of the nine references to Cephas in the New Testament (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Gal. 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14). The only other occurrence of "Cephas" is in John 1:42.

[7] See Shmuel Safrai, "Spoken Languages in the Time of Jesus," *Jerusalem Perspective* 30 (Jan./Feb. 1991), 5-6, 13.

[8] The Hebrew reconstruction *פֶּטְרוֹס* (*Petros*) for the Greek *Πέτρος* (*Petros*) was first put forward in *Jerusalem Perspective* magazine. See the entry "Peter" in "Comments on the Hebrew Reconstruction" under the heading "Matthew 19:27 = Mark 10:28 = Luke 18:28," "*Jerusalem Synoptic Commentary Preview: The Rich Young Ruler Story*," ed. David N. Bivin, *Jerusalem Perspective* 38 & 39 (May-Aug. 1993), 23-24; notes 76-84. See now, David N. Bivin, "Cost of Entering the Kingdom of Heaven" complex at A Reconstruction of the Conjectured Hebrew *Life of Yeshua*. In August 2014 a scholarly version of this article appeared as "Jesus' *Petros-petra* Wordplay (Matt 16:18): Is It Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew?" in *The Language Environment of First-century Judaea: Jerusalem Studies in the Synoptic Gospels* 2 (JCP 26; ed. Randall Buth and R. Steven Notley; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 375-394.

[9] As rendered by the overly literal *New American Standard Bible*.

^[10] The interpreter dug deep into Scripture to find the answer to the question, “Who is this rock [literally, ‘rocks,’ *tsu-RIM*, pl. of *tsur*] that God saw in advance [*me-ROSH*, taken to mean ‘in advance’ rather than ‘from the top’]?” The interpreter’s answer: “Abraham.” This he deduced from Isa. 51:1-2, which equates Abraham with “the rock”—“Look to the rock [*tsur*] from which you were hewn.... Look to Abraham, your father.”

Based on a knowledge of who “the rock” is, the interpreter then created a parable that illustrates the great esteem in which God held Abraham: “When God decided to create the world, he looked into the future and realized that his plans would be frustrated by evil persons. There was nothing solid on which he could build. However, he saw one faithful person—Abraham. This was the solid foundation God needed. God then went ahead with his plans.” Compare the rabbinic saying, “On account of Abraham both this world and the world to come were created” (Tanhuma, *Chaye Sarah* 6 [ed. Buber, p. 60^a]).

Abraham’s identification as “the rock” may be confirmed in another source. In *Mechilta de-Rabbi Shim’on bar Yochai* to Exod. 18:12 (ed. Epstein-Melamed, p. 131, line 22), there appears the curious phrase אברהם בפינה (*av-ra-HAM ba-pi-NAH*, Abraham in [or, at] the corner). (See the discussion in M. B. Lerner, “Comments and *Novellae* on *Mekhilta de Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai*,” *Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple, Mishna and Talmud Period: Studies in Honor of Shmuel Safrai*, ed. Isaiah Gafni, Aharon Oppenheimer and Menahem Stern [Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1993], pp. 373-375 [Hebrew]). Shmuel Safrai suggests that this phrase should be read אברהם הפינה (*av-ra-HAM ha-pi-NAH*, that is, “Abraham the corner[stone]” (private communication).

^[11] Note that the interpreter employs in Hebrew the Greek loanword פֶּטְרָא (*petra*), although in the two Bible passages from which the midrash is derived (Num. 23:9 and Isa. 51:1-2), it is the Hebrew word צוּר (*tsur*) that is used. At the time this midrash was created, the biblical word *tsur* had fallen into disuse in Hebrew, having been replaced by other words such as the loanword *petra*.

The Hebrew word *petra* appears elsewhere in rabbinic literature, for example, in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Shevi’it* 36^a top, chpt. 5, halachah 4; and *Kilaim* 27^b, chpt. 1, halachah 9. In the latter, as in Luke 8:6, 13, there is a sower who sows on *petra*, or bedrock. These examples prove that the word פֶּטְרָא (*petra*) had entered post-biblical Hebrew at least by rabbinic times.

^[12] This occurrence of *petra* was already noted by Marcus Jastrow in his *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (repr. New York: Pardes Publishing House, 1950), p. 1162, entry “פֶּטְרָא III, פֶּיטְרָא.”

^[13] The author of *Yalkut Shim’oni* identifies *Midrash Yelamdenu* as the source of the Abraham-*petra* midrash. According to Shmuel Safrai, *Midrash Yelamdenu*, which has survived in *Tanhuma* and other midrashic works, can be dated to the fifth century A.D. (private communication). However, *Midrash Yelamdenu* contains many traditions that are even earlier. This could be expected since the midrash is divided according to a triennial cycle of Torah readings, the division used in the land of Israel in the first century A.D. (cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* [Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971], 15:794). Further evidence for the antiquity of the Abraham-*petra* midrash is the occurrence of Greek loanwords: ראפט (*petra*) is the Greek πέτρα (*petra*), and תמליוס (*temelyos*), the word translated “foundations” in the Abraham-*petra* midrash, is the Greek θεμέλιος (*themelios*). The frequent occurrence of Greek loanwords in a rabbinic passage may be an indication that the passage dates from the Second Temple period when Greek still heavily influenced Hebrew.

^[14] For an opposing view, see Shmuel Safrai, “The Value of Rabbinic Literature as an Historical Source.”

^[15] It is very difficult to determine whether the *petra* in Jesus’ saying refers to Peter’s declaration or to Peter himself. Commentators, and theologians, are divided on this question. Two major suggestions have been put forward by scholars: that the *petra* is Peter; that the *petra* is Peter’s declaration, “You are the Messiah of God” (Luke 9:20).

In favor of *petra* being a reference to Peter: 1) Jesus hinted at the Abraham-*petra* midrash. Since this midrash speaks of God finding a man (Abraham) on whom he could build, then Jesus was probably hinting that he had found a man like Abraham (i.e., Peter) on whom he could build. 2) In the following verse (Matt 16:19), Jesus invests Peter with great authority in the kingdom of Heaven (Jesus' movement), giving Peter the "keys of the kingdom of Heaven." We learn from the book of Acts that Peter was indeed the leader and spokesman of the early church.

In favor of *petra* referring to Peter's declaration: 1) The word "this" in the phrase "and on this rock" seems to indicate a switch to a subject other than Peter. By using אֵלֶיךָ (*alecha*, on you [I will build]), for example, Jesus could have clearly indicated Peter had he wanted. The words "and on this rock" following "you are Peter" only make sense if Jesus was speaking *about* Peter to others. Since he is not, there must be a switch to a subject other than Peter. 2) Jesus may have alluded to the Num. 23:9 midrash, not to introduce the "dependable man" motif, but rather the "solid foundation" motif. 3) Jesus may have hinted at this midrash to indicate that he would build, not on a man, but rather on Peter's declaration.

^[16] Genesis Rabbah 94:5 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1175), 62:2 (p. 672), 92:2 (p. 1139); Exodus Rabbah 52:3; Jerusalem Talmud, Moed Katan 82^d bot., chpt. 3; Avodah Zarah 42^c, chpt. 3, halachah 1; and elsewhere.

^[17] In Tosefta, Demai 1:11, there is a reference to the marketplace of the town or village of Petros—שַׁל שׁוּק (shuk shel Petros). Shaul Lieberman comments that Petros is "apparently located in the vicinity of Antipatris" (*Tosefta ki-fshutah* to Demai 1:1, p. 199). Michael Avi-Yonah identifies the site Petros with Kh. Budrus (Palestine Grid 147 152), located about seven kilometers east of Lydda/Lod (*Historical Geography of Palestine: From the End of the Babylonian Exile up to the Arab Conquest* [Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1962], p. 107 [Hebrew]).

^[18] There may now be an early example of *Petros* in Hebrew (or Aramaic). On a fragment of leather from Qumran Cave 4 (4QM130), James H. Charlesworth has identified what may be the first instance of Semitic *Petros* from the time of Peter ("Has the Name 'Peter' Been Found Among the Dead Sea Scrolls?" in *Christen und Christliches in Qumran*, ed. Bernhard Mayer [Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1991], pp. 213-225). *Petros*, spelled פִּיטְרוֹס, is found in a list of names that includes Magnus, Malkiah, Mephibosheth, Hyrcanus, Yannai, Aquila, Zakariel, Eli and Omriel.

^[19] Σίμων (*Simon* [Luke 4:38; 5:3, 4, 5, 8, 10; 22:31; 24:34; Matt 10:2 = Mark 3:16 = Luke 6:14; Matt 16:16, 17]) and Συμεών (*Simeon* [Acts 15:14; 2 Pet. 1:1]), both used in the New Testament to refer to Peter, are apparently the transliterations of the Semitic שִׁמְעוֹן (*Shim'on*). Both Greek names were used by the authors of the Septuagint to transliterate שִׁמְעוֹן.

Based on first-century literary and epigraphic sources, *Shim'on* was by far the most common Jewish male name of the period—approximately twenty percent of the Jews we know by name from the Second Temple period were named *Shim'on* (see Rachel Hachlili, "Names and Nicknames of Jews in Second Temple Times," *Eretz-Israel* 17 [1984], 188-211 [Hebrew]; Tal Ilan, "Names of Hasmoneans in the Second Temple Period," *Eretz-Israel* 19 [1987], 238-241 [Hebrew]).

^[20] It is surprising, but the name *Petros* was apparently never used in Greek before its appearance in the New Testament (see the entry "Πέτρος" in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich [University of Chicago Press and Cambridge University Press, 1957], p. 660).

^[21] My Hebrew-speaking Israeli neighbors in Mevaseret Zion (ten kilometers west of Jerusalem) had a dog named "Star." Like the Greek word *petros* (stone), the English word "star" is not usually a personal name. This Israeli family, however, for whom English is a second language, liked the word "star" and used it as a name for their dog.