

The Language Environment of First Century Judaea

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Randall Buth and R. Steven Notley



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Jesus' *Petros*–*petra* Wordplay (Matthew 16:18): Is It Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew?*

David N. Bivin

Κἀγὼ δέ σοι λέγω ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου
τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ πύλαι ᾗδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς.

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 NIV)

Jesus' dramatic statement, "You are *Petros* and on this *petra* I will build my church," appears to contain an obvious Greek wordplay, indicating that Jesus taught in Greek. Therefore, one authority has suggested that the *Petros*–*petra* wordplay is Greek. Others have suggested that it is Aramaic. Is there a third possibility?

1 Language

a A Greek Wordplay?

The words πέτρος and πέτρα, found in Matt 16:18, make a nice wordplay. This has caused Nigel Turner¹ and a few others² to argue that the wordplay is Greek,

* An early version of this article was published as "Matthew 16:18: The *Petros*–*petra* Wordplay—Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew?," *Jerusalem Perspective* 46–47 (September–December 1994): 32–36, 38; online: <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/2718>. A revision and expansion of the article was presented at the 2004 SBL annual meeting (San Antonio), Program Unit "Matthew." I wish to thank Randall Buth for the invaluable editorial suggestions that were incorporated into the present article. I also would like to thank Pieter Lechner for his assistance in sourcing several of the articles and books I have cited.

- 1 Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek: Syntax* (ed. James Hope Moulton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 3:22, states: "The name of the apostle Πέτρος, if it actually means *rock* and corresponds to Aram. קְהָאָס, cannot be connected directly with πέτρος, since this was out of general use; it does not mean *rock* but is a masculinizing of πέτρα." Elsewhere, Turner refers to this wordplay "as evidence which may establish original Greek composition" (*Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965], 181).
- 2 Among recent commentaries on Matthew, see principally Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). For Gundry's comments on Matt 16:17–19, see pp. 330–36. On pp. 333–34 he

evidence that Jesus delivered his teaching in Greek. However, the word *πέτρος* was apparently never used as a Greek name until its use as a second name, or nickname, for a Jewish native of the land of Israel who later became a disciple of Jesus.³ Furthermore, it is probable that Jesus taught in Hebrew, not Greek.⁴

states: "Matthew's composition of vv. 17–19 in Greek also means that we ought to overlook the Aramaic counterpart to *Πέτρος*—viz., *כִּפְּאִי*—in our interpretation of the passage. Simon was called 'Cephas,' to be sure, and this Aramaic form of his nickname would provide a wordplay untarnished by the Greek distinction between *Πέτρος* (masculine) and *πέτρα* (feminine). Nevertheless, the two Greek words provide a wordplay that is good enough to obviate the need of an Aramaic substratum . . . No longer shackled by the need to suppose an Aramaic substratum, we can see that *Πέτρος* is not the *πέτρα* on which Jesus will build his church."

- 3 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; Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Cambridge University Press, 1957), 660.) According to Allison, "in pre-Christian sources *Kêpā'* as a proper name is attested only once [referring to the Aramaic personal name *כִּפְּאִי* from Elephantine pointed out by Fitzmyer, see my n. 6, and *Πέτρος* as a proper name not at all?" (Dale C. Allison, Jr., "Peter and Cephas: One and the Same," *JBL* 111, no. 3 [1992]: 492). However, in Allison's footnote to this statement (his n. 13), he provides counterevidence: "On the other hand, C. C. Caragounis argues that 'in view of the predilection of the ancients for names derived from *πέτρα/πέτρος* . . . it is only natural to suppose that *Πέτρος* was in existence [in pre-Christian times], though no examples of it before the Christian era have turned up as yet' (*Peter and the Rock* [BZAW 58; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990], 24); and Caragounis can demonstrate pagan use of the name in the first and second centuries C.E." Bockmuehl also cites possible counterevidence: "the currency of Peter's name is confirmed in Tal Ilan's identification of three additional first- and second-century Palestinian Jewish individuals who bear the name *Petros*" (Markus Bockmuehl, "Simon Peter's Names in Jewish Sources," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 55, no. 1 [2004]: 58–80 [71–72]). Bockmuehl (p. 72, n. 90) cites Tal Ilan to support this statement: "Ilan 2002 s.v. The first of these is *Petros* (c. 30 C.E.), a freedman of Agrippa's mother Berenice, whom Josephus mentions in passing in *Ant.* 18.6.3 §156 (v.l. *Protos*). The other two names are *Patrin* פִּטְרִין son of Istomachus at Masada (ostracon no. 413, pre-73) and *Patron* פִּטְרוֹן son of Joseph in a Bar Kokhba-period papyrus deed at Nahal Hever (*P. Yadin* 46, 134 C.E.). Although these two names seem at first sight different from *Petros*, the Aramaic rendition of Greek names in -ος as פִּי- or פִּי'- was in fact well established, as Ilan 2002:27 [Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, Part I: Palestine 300 B.C.E.–200 C.E.* (TSAJ 91; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002)] demonstrates (cf. similarly Dalman 1905:176) [Gustav Dalman, *Grammatik des jüdisch-palästinischen Aramäisch nach den Idiomen des palästinischen Talmud, des Onkelostargum und Prophetentargum, und her jerusalemischen Targume* (2nd ed.; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1905)]."
- 4 See Shmuel Safrai, "Spoken and Literary Languages in the Time of Jesus," in *Jesus' Last Week: Jerusalem Studies in the Synoptic Gospels* (ed. R. S. Notley, M. Turnage and B. Becker; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005), 228–29, 233–34. According to Steven Fassberg, "The heterogeneity of Tannaïtic Hebrew known today to Hebraists suggests that it is the product of a language that was

b *An Aramaic Wordplay?*

Most New Testament scholars assume that the *Petros–petra* wordplay is Aramaic.⁵ A few scholars, such as Joseph A. Fitzmyer, have argued their case at

widely used and spoken. Had Tannaitic Hebrew been merely a learned language used by just a few for religious and liturgical purposes, it would not be as variegated as we now know it to have been" (Steven E. Fassberg, "Which Semitic Language Did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews Speak?," *CBQ* 74 [2012]: 275).

- 5 "The passage points to an Aramaic original" (Claude G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels: Edited with an Introduction and a Commentary* [2 vols.; 2d. ed.; London: Macmillan, 1927], 2:234); "The play upon the name Petros and the word *petra* ('rock') indicates an earlier play on the Graecised Aramaic nickname Kephā, which is the same thing as the Aramaic noun *kēphā* meaning 'rock'" (T. W. Manson, "The Sayings of Jesus as Recorded in the Gospels According to St. Matthew and St. Luke Arranged with Introduction and Commentary," in H. D. A. Major, T. W. Manson and C. J. Wright, *The Mission and Message of Jesus: An Exposition of the Gospels in the Light of Modern Research* [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1938; repr. London: SCM Press, 1949], 204); "Jesus, not quoting the OT, here uses Aramaic, not Hebrew, and so uses the only Aramaic word which would serve his purpose" (William Foxwell Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* [AB 26; Garden City: Doubleday, 1971], 195); "There is little doubt that Kephā was the original form of Simon baryonā's nickname, but once the name had passed into Greek as Πέτρος there was little need to continue using it in the old form" (J. K. Elliott, "Κηφᾶς: Σίμων Πέτρος: ὁ Πέτρος: An Examination of New Testament Usage," *NovT* 14.4 [October 1972]: 248); "*Peter... on this rock* (Gk *Petros... petra*): the play on the words is fully effective only in Aramaic (*kēpha... kēpha*) where there is no distinction of gender" (H. Benedict Green, *The Gospel According to Matthew in the Revised Standard Version: Introduction and Commentary* [The New Clarendon Bible; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975], 152); "As we know from Jn 1.42 and the Pauline epistles, behind Πέτρος (and also, probably, πέτρα) lies the Aramaic *kephā'*..." (W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [3 vols.; 1CC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–97], 2:626); "The word play is clear in the Greek (Πέτρος [*Petros*], 'Peter [lit. "stone"]'—πέτρα [*petra*], 'rock') despite the shift required by the feminine form of the noun for 'rock.' It is even more obvious in the Aramaic, where the name ܟܦܬܐ, *Kēpā*, is exactly the same for the word 'rock'" (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew* [WBC 33A–33B; Dallas: Word Books, 1993–95], 470); "From a rabbinic point of view, there is no reason to query the idea of an Aramaic-speaking Simon bar Yonah who was surnamed *Petros* (and later Cephā)... " (Bockmuehl, "Simon Peter's Names in Jewish Sources," 75); "probably... the play on words between Cephā and Cephā (*petros* and *petra* in Greek) can be seen to go back to an Aramaic setting" (Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* [Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006], 316); "*Peter*, a play on Gk 'petra,' 'rock'; the underlying Aram, 'Kephā,' relates to the name Cephā (Jn 1.42; 1 Cor 1.12, and elsewhere)" (Aaron M. Gale, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* [ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011], 30); "Here we have the well-known wordplay on *Peter* (Greek: *Petros*; Aramaic: *kephā'*), whose name means 'rock' (Greek: *petra*)" (Craig A. Evans, *Matthew* [NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 313).

length. Fitzmyer suggests that Jesus employed an Aramaic wordplay כֶּפְחָ–כֶּפְחָ (Kēphā'–kēphā') in his response to Peter's declaration.⁶ In his article, however, Fitzmyer himself acknowledges the difficulties posed by his assumption that underlying the Greek Πέτρος–πέτρα wordplay is an Aramaic wordplay: "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 *kp'* twice, by two Greek words, Πέτρος and πέτρα . . . [I]f the underlying Aramaic of Matt. xvi.18 had *kēphā'* twice, then we should expect σὺ εἶ Πέτρος καὶ ἐπὶ τούτῳ τῷ πέτρῳ οἰκοδομήσω . . ."⁷ In other words, Fitzmyer puzzles that the Matthean Jesus does not say, "and on this *petros* I will build . . ."⁸ This difficulty is a product of Fitzmyer's Aramaic reconstruction. He has been forced to reconstruct Jesus' wordplay in Aramaic using only one word, כֶּפְחָ; therefore,

- 6 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Aramaic Kepha' and Peter's Name in the New Testament," in *Text and Interpretation: Studies in the New Testament Presented to Matthew Black* (ed. Ernest Best and R. McL. Wilson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 121–32; repr. in *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 112–24. According to Fitzmyer, Jesus said: *ʿantāh hū' Kēphā' wē'al kēphā' dēn 'ebnēh* . . . (D.B.: אַנְתָּה הוּא כֶּפְחָ וְעַל כֶּפְחָ דֵּן עֲבִנֶה . . .) (ibid., 130 [= *To Advance*, 118]; Fitzmyer also puts forward his arguments and transcription in his reply to a *BAR* reader's letter [*BAR* 19, no. 1 (January–February 1993): 68, 70]). Researchers are indebted to Fitzmyer for his "Aramaic Kepha' and Peter's Name in the New Testament," in which he points out an overlooked fifth-century B.C.E. occurrence of the Aramaic personal name כֶּפְחָ in an Elephantine text (Fitzmyer, "Aramaic Kepha'," 127–30 [= *To Advance*, 116–18]). Although there can now be no doubt that the name כֶּפְחָ existed in fifth-century B.C.E. Egypt, Fitzmyer cannot point to an example of כֶּפְחָ in the land of Israel. While we find a rabbi named פֶּטְרוֹס, there is no rabbi, or other person, in the land of Israel carrying the name כֶּפְחָ. Bockmuehl acknowledges that the evidence "from first-century Palestine . . . suggests that Cephas was not current as a name" ("Simon Peter's Names in Jewish Sources," 70). Surprisingly, however, instead of concluding that כֶּפְחָ was *not* in use as a name or nickname in the land of Israel in the time of Peter, Bockmuehl concludes that כֶּפְחָ was Peter's nickname: "In the absence of evidence for Cephas as a Jewish name, however, this remains as Peter's most distinctive epithet—his nickname rather than a proper name . . . It is this [nickname] that characterised him in the Aramaic-speaking churches of Judaea, and which ironically survived even Paul's move in the Gentile world" ("Simon Peter's Names," 70–71).
- 7 Fitzmyer, "Aramaic Kepha'," 130–31 (= *To Advance*, 119). Nolland emphasizes the difficulty contained in Fitzmyer's Aramaic assumption: "in Aramaic, as far as we know, no etymologically linked second word is available to take the place of πέτρα" (John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], 669).
- 8 Assuming his suggested Aramaic reconstruction, Fitzmyer expects the Greek masculine dative of πέτρος instead of the Greek feminine dative of πέτρα, the reading of all Greek manuscripts. For Fitzmyer's Aramaic reconstruction to be probable, the Greek text should read ἐπὶ τούτῳ τῷ πέτρῳ rather than ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρῳ.

he is unable to preserve the wordplay reflected in Greek, a play on two different words. The only difference between *Kēphā'* and *kēphā'* 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. Fitzmyer has no recourse but to surmise, "So, perhaps we are dealing with an Aramaic term that was used with different nuances."⁹ Fitzmyer's Aramaic wordplay is insipid, even if we would be willing to acknowledge that this is a wordplay.

Fitzmyer's Aramaic reconstruction presents other difficulties. First, Peter is known in the Synoptic Gospels only by the names Σίμων and Πέτρος.¹⁰ The Greek form of Peter's Aramaic name, Κηφᾶς (Cephas = Aramaic כֶּפָּא, *Kepha*), is not used in these sources.¹¹ Second, in this period Jewish sages ordinarily taught in Hebrew, not Aramaic.¹²

c A Hebrew Wordplay?

A possible solution to the difficulties inherent in the Greek and Aramaic assumptions is to suppose that both *petros* and *petra* became Hebrew words, and that Jesus spoke to Peter in Hebrew. Jesus may have said: אַתָּה פֶּטְרוֹס וְעַל אֶתְּהָא הַפֶּטְרָא הַזֶּה אֶבְנֶה אֶת עַמִּיתִי (‘‘You are *Petros*, and on this *petra* I will build my community’’).¹³ The Hebrew wordplay, then, would be פֶּטְרוֹס–פֶּטְרָא.

The word πέτρος entered the Hebrew language as a proper noun. A certain פֶּטְרוֹס (*Petros*), for instance, was the father of Rabbi Yose ben Petros.¹⁴ This

9 Fitzmyer, ‘‘Aramaic Kepha,’’ 131 (= *To Advance*, 119).

10 On Σίμων (Simon), see n. 16.

11 In the New Testament, Κηφᾶς occurs once in the Gospel of John (John 1:42) and eight times in Paul's epistles (1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Gal 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14).

12 See Safrai, ‘‘Spoken and Literary Languages,’’ 228–29, 233–34. In later rabbinic sources, parables, even when found in an Aramaic context, are preserved in Hebrew. Notley and Safrai have collected and edited the 456 tannaitic parables (R. Steven Notley and Ze'ev Safrai, *Parables of the Sages: Jewish Wisdom from Jesus to Rav Ashi* [Jerusalem: Carta, 2011]). They state: ‘‘The parable is always told in Hebrew, even in Amoraic texts written in Aramaic. On the other hand, the Amoraic story (עובדא) is usually in Aramaic. This distinction in language is not evident in Tannaitic compositions, which are all in Hebrew’’ (p. 6).

13 The reconstruction פֶּטְרוֹס for the Greek *Petros* was put forward in ‘‘Jerusalem Synoptic Commentary Preview: The Rich Young Ruler Story’’ (ed. David N. Bivin), *Jerusalem Perspective* 38–39 (May–August 1993): 23–24, nn. 76–84. See the entry ‘‘Peter’’ in ‘‘Comments on the Hebrew Reconstruction’’ under the heading ‘‘Matthew 19:27 = Mark 10:28 = Luke 18:28.’’ For my 2011 revision of these comments, see the entry ‘‘L95 Πέτρος,’’ in Bivin, ‘‘Counting the Cost of Discipleship,’’ in *The Life of Yeshua: A Suggested Reconstruction*, 56–60; online: <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/712>.

14 *Gen. Rab.* 62:2 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 672: רַבִּי יוֹסִי בֶן פֶּטְרוֹס; 92:2 (p. 1139: רַבִּי יוֹסִי בֶרַ; 94:5 (p. 1175: רַבִּי יוֹסִי בֶן פֶּטְרוֹס; *Exod. Rab.* 52:3: רַבִּי יוֹסִי בֶן פֶּטְרוֹס; *y. Mo'ed Katan* 82d

Yose was a Jewish sage of the land of Israel who was active around 200–250 C.E., placing his father, Petros, as early as the second half of the second century C.E. In a tannaitic source, we also find a town or village marketplace named Petros in the vicinity of Antipatris, near Lydda.¹⁵ These examples show that Hebrew speakers could borrow the word *πέτρος* and use it as a name.

Apparently, Jesus' most prominent disciple bore two Hebrew names: שִׁמְעוֹן (*Shim'on*, Simon),¹⁶ the name Peter's parents gave him at his circumcision, and

(ch. 3, halakah 5: רבי יוסי בר פיטרס; y. *Avod. Zar.* 42c (ch. 3, halakah 1: רבי יוסי בר פיטרס); and elsewhere. Note the personal name פטריס (*patrys*) at רקמו (*Raqmu* = city of Petra) in a Nabatean-Aramaic burial monument inscription (see my n. 20). Is the name פטריס related to the Latin *patricius*, or can we relate it to the Hebrew פטרס/פטרסו? If the latter, then we have the personal name *Petros* in Petra in 60 C.E.

- 15 In *t. Demai* 1.11 there is a reference to the marketplace of the town (or village) of *Petros*, שוק של פטרוס (*shuk shel Petros*). Saul Lieberman comments that *Petros* is “apparently located in the vicinity of Antipatris” (*Tosefta Kifshutah* to *Demai* 1.1, 199). Michael Avi-Yonah identifies the site *Petros* with Kh. Budrus (Map Reference 147152), 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], 107 [Hebrew]). We should not assume the town sprang up only a short time before the *Tosefta* was redacted near the beginning of the third century C.E.
- 16 Σίμων (Simon—Matt 4:18; 10:2; 16:16, 17; 17:25; Mark 1:16 [twice], 29, 30, 36; 3:16; 14:37; Luke 4:38; 5:3, 4, 5, 8, 10; 6:14; 22:31; 24:34; Acts 1:13; 10:5, 17, 18, 32; 11:13) and Σιμεών (Simeon—Acts 15:14; 2 Pet 1:1) are used in the New Testament to refer to Peter. Both Greek names were used by the authors of the Septuagint to transliterate שמעון (*Shim'on*). Peter's Hebrew name might also have been סמון (variant: סימון), which is attested in inscriptions from the period (for examples, see L. Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* [Jerusalem: The Israel Antiquities Authority and The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994]: Σίμων [Inscriptions 99, 332, 560, 778, 794, 795, 868]; Σίμων [Inscription 332]; שמעון [Inscriptions 12, 16, 18, 26, 38, 41, 61, 150, 151, 428, 488, 501, 502, 520, 651, 820]; סמון [Inscription 200]; שמון [Inscription 651]); however the spelling Σιμεών, for example, in 2 Pet 1:1, implies the Hebrew name שמעון, not the Grecized Hebrew סמון. A Hebrew סמון probably would not produce Σιμεών. Based on first-century literary and epigraphic sources, שמעון (= Σίμων) was by far the most common Jewish male name of the period—approximately 20 percent of the Jews we know by name from the Second Temple period were named שמעון-Σίμων (see Rachel Hachlili, “Names and Nicknames of Jews in Second Temple Times” [Hebrew], *Eretz-Israel* 17 [1984]: 188–211; Tal Ilan, “Names of Hasmonians in the Second Temple Period,” *Eretz-Israel* 19 [1987]: 238–41 [Hebrew]; cf. Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, Part I: Palestine 330 BCE–200 CE* (TSAJ 91; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002)). The personal name Πέτρος (always referring to Jesus' disciple) is found 156 times in the New Testament.

פֶּטְרוֹס (*Petros*, Peter), Simon's nickname, or second name, with which contemporaries could distinguish him from the many other Simons in the population.¹⁷

Like πέτρος, πέτρα entered the Hebrew language. The Hebrew word פֶּטְרָא (also spelled פִּטְרָא, פִּטְרָא, פִּטְרָא) is found in rabbinic literature, for example, in the Jerusalem Talmud in Tractates *Kil'ayim* and *Shebi'it*.¹⁸ In the former, as in Luke 8:6, a sower whose seed falls on *petra* is mentioned.¹⁹

17 Since such a large percentage of the male population carried the name "Shimon," it was necessary to specify, by the addition of a second name or second designation, which Shimon was intended. (Cf. the designation "*ben Sira*" [son of Sira] for a Shimon who was the son of a *Yeshua* [Jesus]: בן סירא דברי שמעון בן ישוע שנקרא בן סירא [Sir 41:30].) Thus, we find in the New Testament, for example, Σίμων ὁ Καναναῖος (Matt 10:4 = Σίμων ὁ ζηλωττής in Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13); Σίμων Βαριωνᾶ (Matt 16:17); Σίμων ὁ λεπρός (Matt 26:6; Mark 14:3); Σίμων ὁ Κυρηναῖος (Matt 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26); Σίμων ὁ μαγεύων (Acts 8:9), and Σίμων ὁ βυρσεύς (Acts 9:43; 10:6, 32). For Peter's Jewish names, see further Bockmuehl, "Simon Peter's Names in Jewish Sources." The double name חַנְנִיָּה נֹתוֹס (*Hananiah Nothos*) appears in the "Register of Rebukes" (4Q477). Because the designation is composed of a Hebrew name followed by a borrowed Greek word, νότος (*notos*, south), it reminds us of the name Σίμων Πέτρος (= שמעון פֶּטְרוֹס). In the New Testament the double name Σίμων Πέτρος appears twice in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 16:16; Luke 5:8) and 17 times in the Gospel of John. The variant Συμεὼν Πέτρος appears once in the New Testament (2 Pet 1:1). Such double names were common in the period, and, since there were relatively few male personal names in use, another of the ways of specifying the person referred to. Jesus' most trusted disciple, שמעון, one of a multitude of Shimons in the population of the land of Israel in the first century, also could be distinguished by reference to his father, יוֹנָה (*Yonah*, Jonah). See the reference to Σίμων Βαριωνᾶ in Matt 16:17, the Greek transcription of יוֹנָה בֶּר שְׁמֵעוֹן (Shimon son of Jonah). The name Βαριωνᾶ (בר יונה) is often assumed to be "the transliterated Aramaic for 'son of Jonah'" (so Hagner, *Matthew*, 469), but בר is not necessarily an indication of Aramaic. Cf., for example, the יהודה בר אלעזר הסופר ossuary inscription (*CH*, no. 1308). Fitzmyer and Harrington classify it as Aramaic (Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Daniel J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts* [Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978], 174, 232, no. 99), but the inscription is obviously Hebrew, as the title הסופר (the scribe) indicates.

18 γ. *Kil'ayim* 27b (ch. 1, halakah 9: מודה ר"ש בן לקיש בזרע ע"ג הים ע"ג פטורה ע"ג סלעים) and γ. *Shevi'it* 36a (ch. 5, halakah 4: פואה של צילעות פטורה). The assumption is that in these two passages the variants פֶּטְרָא (perhaps representing a different pronunciation of the word *petra*) and פֶּטְרוֹרָא (perhaps a misspelling of פֶּטְרָא) are the equivalents of פֶּטְרָא and פֶּטְרָא.

19 The Synoptic parallels are ἐπὶ τὸ πετρῶδες (Mark 4:5) and ἐπὶ τὰ πετρῶδη (Matt 13:5). In the New Testament the word πετρῶδες appears four times (only in the Markan and Matthean accounts of the Parable of the Sower and the Soils, and its interpretation), and appears to be a more complicated Greek replacement for the pre-Synoptic πέτρα. The word πέτρα appears 90 times in the Septuagint, but πετρῶδες never. (By comparison, in the works of Josephus we find πέτρα 78 times and πετρῶδες 10 times.) Note the house constructed with

The Hebrew word פֶּטְרָא also appears in the *Avraham–petra* midrash. (See the discussion on the dating of the *Avraham–petra* midrash in the “Culture” section below.) These examples help to demonstrate that the word פֶּטְרָא had entered Post-biblical Hebrew at least by rabbinic times.²⁰ It is possible, therefore, that both פֶּטְרוֹס and פֶּטְרָא existed in first-century Hebrew and were available for the wordplay.

A Hebrew hypothesis provides solutions to the difficulties raised by the Aramaic reconstruction of Matt 16:18: it preserves the *Petros–petra* wordplay that is reflected in Greek, a contrast between two different though related words; it permits us 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.

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. Apparently, the name arose in the land of Israel within a Hebrew-speaking community in an area with prestige influence from Greek. Tannaitic evidence supports this assump-

its foundations on πέτρα (“solid rock, bedrock”; Matt 7:24–25; Luke 6:48) in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders. *Petra* appears 15 times in the New Testament.

- 20 Like πέτρος, πέτρα became a place name. The city of Petra (the biblical סֶלַע [Judg 1:36; 2 Kgs 14:7; Isa 16:1; 42:11], always translated by πέτρα in the LXX; Map Reference 205020) is mentioned five times by Strabo (*Geog.* XVI.iv.2, 18, 21, 23, 24) and 14 times by Josephus (*Ant.* 3.40; 4.82, 161; 14.16, 80, 362; 17.54; 18.120; *J.W.* 1.125, 159, 267, 574, 590; 4.454). In Strabo and Josephus’ time, Petra was the capital of the Nabatean kingdom. Note also the 32 references to Petra in the 26 Greek documents found in the Babata archive, which date from the twenties and thirties of the second century C.E. These documents were published in *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters: Greek Papyri* (ed. Naftali Lewis; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Shrine of the Book, 1989). *Ant.* 4.161 refers to the five Midianite kings mentioned in Josh 13:21, one of whom was named Πέρεμος (= מֶרֶם; *Rekem*); “the city which bears his name ranks highest in the land of the Arabs and to this day is called by the whole Arabian nation, after the name of its royal founder, Rekeme [Περέμης]: it is the Petra of the Greeks” (trans. Loeb). In a Nabatean-Aramaic burial monument inscription from Petra dating to ca. 60 C.E. published by J. Starcky (“Nouvelle epitaphe nabatéenne donnant le nom Sémitique de Petra,” *RB* 72 [1965]: 95–97; pl. v.–vi.), we find the Nabatean name for their capital: רקמו (*Raqmu* = Petra). The inscription reads: דא נפש פטריס בר חרפטסו יקא די הוה ברקמו די מית בגרשו. See the inscription’s translation in Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew and Nabataean Documentary Texts from the Judaean Desert and Related Material* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: The Ben-Zion Dinur Center for Research in Jewish History [The Hebrew University], 2000), 2:107: “This is the burial-monument of *Ptryś* son of *Hrptśw*, the distinguished/dear, who was in *Rqmw* (= *Petra*), (and) who died in *Grśw* (= Gerash) . . .”

tion. Provincials who spoke Greek (the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean world) as their second or third language borrowed the word πέτρος and used it as a personal name in their local language.²¹ Until it appeared in Greek in the New Testament, the name *Petros* may have existed only in Hebrew.

2 Culture

Not only did πέτρα become a Hebrew word, but it is the key word in a rabbinic interpretation (preserved in Hebrew) that is strikingly similar to Jesus' declaration to Peter. In a Hebrew source from the thirteenth century, we find a tantalizing midrash. An anonymous interpreter, commenting on Num 23:9, "I see him from the top of the rocks,"²² describes the dilemma God confronted when he wished to create the world:²³

21 Israelis whose first language is Modern Hebrew interact with the English language in a similar fashion. My Hebrew-speaking Israeli neighbors in Maoz Zion (ten kilometers west of Jerusalem) had a dog named "Star." Like the word πέτρος ("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. Perhaps an even better example of this phenomenon is the transformation in personal nicknames taking place today in Thailand: "Bangkok: . . . For as long as people here can remember, children have been given playful nicknames that no matter how silly—classics include Shrimp, Chubby and Crab—are carried into adulthood. But now, to the consternation of some nickname purists, children are being given such offbeat English-language nicknames as Mafia or Seven—as in 7-Eleven, the convenience store. The spread of foreign names mirrors a rapidly urbanizing society influenced by everything from Hollywood to fast-food chains and English Premier League soccer . . . according to the results of a survey of almost 3,000 students in and around the city of Khon Khaen, in northeastern Thailand . . . Forty percent of secondary students and 56 percent of primary students had English nicknames, the survey showed, compared with just 6 percent of university students, indicating a clear trend among the youngest Thais . . . Ball was the most popular English nickname . . . followed by Oil and Bank" (Thomas Fuller, "English Nickname Fad Annoys Thai Purists," *International Herald Tribune* [August 24, 2007]: 5).

22 As rendered by the overly literal New American Standard Bible.

23 The interpreter digs deep into Scripture to find the answer to the question, "Who is this rock (literally, 'rocks,' צָרִים) that God saw in advance (here מֵרָאשׁ is taken to mean 'in advance' rather than 'from the top of')?" The interpreter's answer: "Abraham." This the interpreter deduced from Isa 51:1–2, which equates Abraham with "the rock"—"Look to the rock (צוּר) from which you were hewn . . . Look to Abraham, your father." 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. 60a]). Abraham's identification as "the rock" may perhaps be seen in another source: in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai* to

It can be compared to a king who desired to build a palace. He began digging, searching for (something solid) on which he could lay a foundation [תמליוס, a Greek loanword = θεμέλιος],²⁴ 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 [פטרא, a Greek loanword = πέτρα].²⁵

“Here,” he said, “I will build,” and he laid foundations [תמליוס] 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 [lit., ‘are standing,’ עומדין] and provoke me to anger?” he said.

When, however, the Holy One, blessed is he, saw Abraham who was destined to arise [שעתיד לעמוד]²⁶ he said, “Here I have found solid rock [פטרא] upon which I can build and upon which I can lay the world’s foundations.”

Exod 18:12 (ed. Epstein-Melamed, 131, line 22), there appears the curious phrase אברהם בפינה (*Avraham bapinah*, Abraham in [or, at] the corner). (See the discussion in M. B. Lerner, “Comments and Novellae on Mekhilta de Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai,” in *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], 373–75 [Hebrew]). Shmuel Safrai suggested to me that this phrase should be read אברהם הפינה (*Avraham hapinah*), that is, “Abraham the corner[stone].”

24 See Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (2d ed.; New York, 1903; repr. New York: Pardes, 1950), 1677, entry “תמליוס.” Cf. “Then therefore . . . you have been built on the foundation (θεμέλιος) of the apostles and prophets, Messiah Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:19–21).

25 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 צור that is used, in the midrash the interpreter employs the Greek loanword פטרא. This occurrence of *pitra/petra* was noted by Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1162, entry “פִּטְרָה, פִּטְרָא.”

26 The verb עָמַד (“stand”), with the sense “arise, appear,” occurs in Late and Post-biblical Hebrew (Ezra 2:63; Neh 7:65; Sir 47:1, 12), and frequently in the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g. CD 1.14; 3.19; 5.5, 20; 6.10; 7.20; 12.23; 14.19; 20.1), where particularly relevant to the *Avraham–petra* midrash are two references to the “standing” (i.e. appearing) of the Davidic Messiah, “the Branch of David” (4Q161 f8 10.17; 4Q174 f1 2i.11).

Therefore, he [God] called Abraham *Tsur*,²⁷ as it is said, “Look to the *tsur* from which you were hewn . . .” (*Yalkut Shim'oni* I.766, to Num 23:9, author's translation)²⁸

- 27 Part of the *Avraham-petra* midrash's shock is that in Scripture God is הַצֹּרֵר (“The Rock,” Deut 32:4 [note also Gen 49:24 where God is referred to as אֶבֶן יִשְׂרָאֵל, “The Stone/Rock of Israel”]). The creator of the *Avraham-petra* midrash demonstrated, by combining Isa 51:1–2 with Num 23:9, that Abraham is “The *Tsur*”! Jesus' hearers would have been impacted in a similar fashion by Jesus' *Petros-petra* wordplay: Jesus declared Peter to be the *Petra-Tsur*, a trustworthy man like Abraham, the sure foundation upon which Jesus could build his Kingdom of Heaven community.
- 28 The *Avraham-petra* midrash is well-known to scholars. Most commentators note this midrash, and, despite the late date of its source, most recognize that it may have relevance for interpreting Jesus' declaration to Peter. Green understands the midrash's importance, stating (after quoting from the midrash): “Peter is to be to the new covenant what Abraham was to the old, the man of faith (cp. Rom. 4) . . . what is built on him, the Church . . .” (Green, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 152). Green further identifies Peter as “the foundation-stone [אֶבֶן הַשִּׁתִּיבָה] in the centre of the temple at Jerusalem” (ibid., 152), a notion that Lachs rejects: “It is unlikely that the *petra* theme is related to the *even shetiyah*, the foundation stone which was in the Holy of Holies in the Temple and considered to be the navel of the world” (Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* [Hoboken, N.J.: KTAV, 1987], 257, n. 4). Nolland has reservations about the relevance of the *Avraham-petra* midrash for understanding Jesus' statement in Matt 16:18: “In Is. 51:1–2 Abraham and Sarah are probably identified as ‘the rock from which you were hewn.’ Though the late Jewish text *Midr. Yal. Šim'oni* 1.766 explains this in terms of God considering (the prospect of) Abraham an adequate foundation rock for the creation (construction) of the world, the imagery in Is. 51 is of Abraham as a quarry and not as a foundation” (Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 671). Gundry, too, discounts the *Avraham-petra* midrash: “The rabbinic saying that portrays Abraham as the rock on which God built and founded the world (see Str-B 1. 733; cf. Isa 51:1) hardly demands an identification of Matthew's rock with Peter . . .” (Gundry, *Matthew*, 336). Witherington is aware of the *Avraham-petra* midrash, but attributes it to rabbinic knowledge of Christian tradition: “There is an interesting later rabbinic tradition in Greek [*sic*: the tradition is transmitted in Hebrew—D.B.] in which Abraham is called a *petra* on which God will build this world, but it seems likely to be a polemical counter to the Jesus tradition from a much later time” (Witherington, *Matthew*, 317–18). Like Witherington, Davies and Allison suspect Christian influence “because of the lateness of the text and the use of the loanword *pîtrā*” (Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:624). Lachs gives an English translation of the *Avraham-petra* midrash, commenting only that it is “an interesting parallel” (Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary*, 256). Hagner only vaguely alludes to the *Avraham-petra* midrash, writing: “For Jewish background concerning a community built upon a ‘rock,’ see Str-B 1.732–33” (Hagner, *Matthew*, 471). For the text of the *Avraham-petra* midrash, Manson simply quotes George Foot Moore (*Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* [2 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.:

The midrash leads us from צְרִים (“rocks”) in Num 23, to צוֹר (“rock”) in Isa 51, to פֶּטְרָא. Having a knowledge of who “the rock” is, the interpreter 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 to create the world.²⁹

The same “rock–petra” interlinguistic and textually based wordplay is found in Matt 16:18, where Jesus, having found a trustworthy disciple named *Petros* (“Rock”) upon whom he could build his Kingdom of Heaven movement, says to him, “You are *Petros* and upon this *petra* I will build.”

Yalkut Shim'oni is a very late collection of midrash; however, it contains much early material.³⁰ Some scholars might argue that this rabbinic source

Harvard University Press, 1927], 1:538), with no citation of the rabbinic source (Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, 202–3). Manson's comment about the midrash is significant: “On this analogy it can be contended that Peter is the foundation of the New Israel” (ibid., 203). Montefiore also quotes Moore's translation (Claude G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* [London: Macmillan, 1930], 255–56), but he cites the source: “Yalkut §766 on Numbers xxiii. 9” (ibid., 256). Montefiore's only comment about the value of this rabbinic source is: “The passage quoted in Moore i. p. 538 about Abraham is interesting” (ibid., 255). While the *Avraham–petra* midrash has been noticed by scholars, what perhaps has been overlooked is that Matt 16:18 proves that this midrash, recorded only in medieval times, already existed in the Second Temple period.

29 We might 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. 60a]).

30 The author of the thirteenth-century C.E. *Yalkut Shim'oni* identifies *Midrash Yelamdenu* as the source of the *Avraham–petra* midrash. According to Shmuel Safrai, *Midrash Yelamdenu*, which has survived in *Tanhuma* and other midrashic works, can be dated to the fifth century C.E. (personal communication). (*Tanhuma*'s final compilation was in ca. 800 C.E. according to Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies: A Guide to the Background Literature* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005], 241.) 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 C.E. Further evidence for the antiquity of the *Avraham–petra* midrash is the occurrence of Greek loanwords: פֶּטְרָא is the Greek πέτρα, and תְּמֻלִּיּוֹת, the word translated “foundations” in the *Avraham–petra* midrash, is the Greek θεμέλιος. The frequent occurrence of Greek loanwords in a rabbinic passage may be an additional indication that the passage dates from the Second Temple period when Greek still heavily influenced Hebrew (my thanks to Joseph Frankovic for emphasizing this point to me). Randall Buth has pointed out to me that evidence from the Targums (ca. first–eighth centuries C.E.) strengthens the supposition that the *Avraham–petra* midrash

can tell us little or nothing about what a first-century Jewish sage might have said;³¹ yet the similarity between Jesus' declaration and the above midrash is too great to be coincidental. It seems likely 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.

The *Avraham–petra* midrash is so similar culturally and linguistically to Jesus' *Petros–petra* midrash that there are only three logical possibilities: (1) the rabbis borrowed from Jesus; (2) Jesus and the rabbis used common traditions; (3) each independently created the midrash. While certainty is not possible, the name *Petros*, attested in tannaitic (second-century) rabbinic sources at a time of church–synagogue hostilities, suggests that the first possibility—that the rabbis borrowed from Christian sources—is less probable, and that the second and third possibilities are more probable. Most probable is that Jesus and the rabbis used common traditions.

dates from a much earlier period than *Yalkut Shim'oni*: the redactors of the Targums probably did not create the midrashic material found in their translations of the Bible. Rather, in most cases, this material already had a long history of development and transmission. The identification of Abraham as the *tsur* of Isa 51:1, or one of the *tsurim* of Num 23:9, was made long before *Yalkut Shim'oni* was redacted. The connection between Abraham and "rock" (*tsur*), assumed in Jesus' *Petros–petra* wordplay, is found in three Targumim to the Pentateuch: *Neofiti*, *Fragmentary Targum* and *Pseudo-Jonathan*. Here is the text (with English translation) of *Tg. Neof.*: אברהם חמי אנה עמא האליין מדברין ואתיין בזכות אבהתה (ב) וזכות אמהתה צדיקה דמתילין בגלמטה שרה צדיקה דמתילין בטווריה אברהם יצחק ויעק[ב] וזכות אמהתה צדיקה דמתילין בגלמטה שרה (For I see this people being led and coming for the merits of the just fathers who are comparable to the mountains [טווריה = *tsurim*]: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and for the merits of the just mothers who are comparable to the hills: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. Behold this people encamp by themselves and do not mix themselves in the law of the nations" (*Tg. Neof.* Num 23:9; text: Alejandro Díez Macho, *Neophyti* 1 [6 vols.; Madrid and Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1968–79], 4:221, 591–92 [Engl. trans. by Martin McNamara]). *Frg. Tg.* Num 23:9 and *Tg. Ps.-J.* Num 23:9 preserve this tradition in almost the same words. (For text and translation of *Frg. Tg.* Num 23:9, see Michael L. Klein, *The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch According to their Extant Sources* [2 vols.; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1980], 1:201; 2:74.)

- 31 For an opposing view, see Shmuel Safrai, "The Value of Rabbinic Literature as an Historical Source," *Jerusalem Perspective* (September 29, 2009); online: <http://www.jerusalem-perspective.com/4669>. Should we think it strange for late midrashim to show up in the New Testament, we need only recall that the "Jannes and Jambres" midrash mentioned in 2 Tim 3:8–9 appears not earlier than the third century C.E. in the Targumim, and much later in the Midrashim. (I am indebted to Randall Buth for the content of the previous sentence.) 2 Timothy is dated as early as the autumn of 58 C.E. by John A. T. Robinson (*Redating the New Testament* [London: SCM, 1976], 80, 352).

Matthew, a first-century document, which may also be pre-70 C.E., is our earliest witness to the *Avraham–petra* tradition. Because of the *Petros–petra* midrash preserved by the author of Matthew, we may assume that the *Avraham–petra* midrash predates Jesus' time. If Jesus used the midrash in speaking to a first-century audience, the midrash must have been developed considerably earlier.

The Abraham–*petra* midrash is so late that it could well have been a reapplication to Abraham of a Christian motif, showing that a Jewish compiler indeed borrowed this tradition from Christians, or even that it was independently created at a much later date. However, there is an extraordinary parallel to “on this bedrock [i.e. foundation] I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18) in the Thanksgiving Scroll:

The depths roar to my groaning and [my] lif[e approaches] the gates of death (שערי מות). I am as one who enters a fortified city and seeks shelter behind a high wall until his deliverance. I rejo[ice] in Your truth, my God, for You set a foundation upon the rock (תשים סוד על סלע), beams upon a just measuring line and tru[e] plumb line, to [ma]ke the tested stones into a strong building which shall not be shaken. All who enter it shall not totter. For the stranger may not enter her [gat]es; armored doors (דלתִי מִגֵּן) do not allow entry, and strong bolts (ברִיחי עֹז) which do not shatter. (1QHa 14.27–31)³²

This text from the Dead Sea Scrolls is the smoking gun. It proves that the idea of building a community on bedrock already existed in Jewish tradition by the first century. At Qumran, Jews talked about a community built on a solid foundation. Jesus' Parable of the House Built on Bedrock [πέτρα] (Matt 7:24–25; Luke 6:48) provides additional support for this assumption. Although in Jesus' parable the image of a man building a “house” on *petra* is slightly different than founding a “community,” Jesus' parable contains, like the *Avraham–petra* midrash, both “to build” and “πέτρα,” showing that Jesus' culture already had

32 English translation from *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (trans. Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg, Jr. and Edward M. Cook; [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005], 188–89). Eduard Schweizer notes this parallel in his *The Good News According to Matthew* (trans. David E. Green; Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 342. The parallel is likewise noted by Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 425–31; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 362–63; and R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 620–25. Schweizer also points out the reference to “a community (עדה) being built (לבנות) by the Teacher of Righteousness” in the Qumran Peshier Psalms, 4Q171 f1+3 4iii.16 (ibid., 342).

these metaphors. The Dead Sea Scrolls passage demonstrates that the motif of founding a community on a sure foundation was already in the air in Jesus' time, already part of cultural tradition.

3 The “Cephas” Riddle

Peter is referred to in the Synoptic Gospels by the personal names Σίμων, Πέτρος and Σίμων Πέτρος.³³ The author of the Gospel of John uses these same three names for Peter.³⁴ Once, however, the author of John refers to Peter as Κηφᾶς (Cephas: Σὺ εἶ Σίμων ὁ υἱὸς Ἰωάννου, σὺ κληθήσῃ Κηφᾶς, ὃ ἐρμηνεύεται Πέτρος, John 1:42). Paul usually refers to Peter as Κηφᾶς (Cephas),³⁵ but when he refers to Peter's “mission to the circumcised,” he calls him *Petros* (twice in Gal 2:7–8). Why, in the Synoptic Gospels, where we would expect Cephas, do we find Peter's Hebrew names, “Simon,” “Petros” and “Simon Petros,” while, in the Gospel of John and in Paul's epistles, where we would expect to find a Greek transcription of Peter's Hebrew name, do we find the Greek equivalent of Peter's Aramaic name, “Cephas”? Furthermore, why did John use the name Κηφᾶς (Cephas) only once in his Gospel? If John never again used Cephas, why did he bother using it in the first place?

The enigma, therefore, is that Paul, when writing primarily to Gentile audiences in the diaspora, uses the name that is assumed to be a “Palestinian” name, Cephas–*Kepha*, while the Synoptic Gospels use the name that is assumed to be a Gentile name, *Petros*.

Many New Testament scholars view the Synoptic *Petros* texts as secondary and directed toward a Gentile audience, but view the *Cephas* texts as primal, “Palestinian” bedrock.³⁶ On the other hand, the riddle of the name *Cephas* is so serious that a few scholars have even questioned whether some of the eight references to *Cephas* in Paul's epistles are indeed references to Jesus' disciple Peter.³⁷

33 For a listing of occurrences in the New Testament, see nn. 16 and 17.

34 John refers to Peter by name as Πέτρος (16 times), Σίμων (4 times) and Σίμων Πέτρος (17 times).

35 For the references, see n. 11.

36 “The name Kephas may have come to Paul first from the earliest Jerusalem church tradition as the list in I Corinthians xv 5 may suggest” (Elliott, “Κηφᾶς: Πέτρος: ὁ Πέτρος,” 250).

37 For instance, Ehrman: “When Paul mentions Cephas, he apparently does *not* mean Simon Peter, the disciple of Jesus” (Bart D. Ehrman, “Cephas and Peter,” *JBL* 109, no. 3 [1990]: 474). Allison, in a critical note in reply to Ehrman's article, concludes: “in lieu of more solid evidence to the contrary, are we not compelled to believe that Peter and Cephas were one and the same?” (Allison, “Peter and Cephas: One and the Same,” 495). On this question,

Adding to the confusion is the assumption that Peter's name was changed by Jesus.³⁸ This notion arose by conflating the Synoptic Gospels' σὺ εἶ Πέτρος ("You are *Petros*") with John 1:42, where Jesus says, σὺ εἶ Σίμων ὁ υἱὸς Ἰωάννου, σὺ κληθήσῃ Κηφᾶς, ὃ ἐρμηνεύεται Πέτρος ("You are Simon the son of John. You will be called *Cephas*, which means *Petros*"). This conflation resulted in the mistaken assumption that Matthew's "You are *Petros*" is likewise a name change. However, in Matthew, Jesus' declaration begins with "You are *Petros*" rather than "You are Simon." Without our having been influenced by John 1:42, we would assume that *Petros* was already Peter's name. The Synoptic Gospels present the name *Petros* as a given, not as a name change. Some harmonists might argue that John's account is earlier than that of Matthew, that the name change had already occurred, but that argument fails on two counts: (1) the synoptists give *Petros* as Peter's name, not *Cephas*, and, presumably, they would not have used *Petros* if they had been writing to an audience in Antioch (note Paul's use of *Cephas* there), or if they had been writing in the Galilee, where, according to the Aramaic hypothesis, *Cephas* would have been known; and (2) John 1:42 is not a historical sequence, that is, John's preceding words, "Behold, the lamb of God" (John 1:36), is clearly a midrash on the function of John the Baptist's testimony, not his words in time and space. John the evangelist's statement is not tied to the Synoptic Gospels' "*petra*–bedrock" saying, although his statement may assume it.

John 1:42 seems to imply a knowledge of the Synoptic tradition because "you are Simon and you will be called *Cephas*" comes from out of the blue. This tradition would not make sense unless one already knew the *Petros* confession story found in Matt 16:13–20. It appears that John 1:42 was written after the time of the *Petros*–*petra* story. *Cephas* would seem to be a new name; throughout

see also James M. Scott, "A Question of Identity: Is Cephas the Same Person as Peter?," *JBS* 3, no. 3 (2003): 1–20. Cephas' alleged hypocrisy in his behavior toward the Gentiles in Antioch and Paul's strong rebuke of him (in Gal 2:11–14) made some church fathers (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, quoted by Eusebius [*H.E.* 1.12.2]) so uncomfortable that they suggested that this Cephas was not identical with the Cephas, a pillar in the Jerusalem church, whom Paul mentions in Gal 2:9, and/or with the *Petros* whom he mentioned in Gal 2:7–8.

38 Bockmuehl makes this assumption: "while Greek speakers inevitably account for the preponderance of *Petros* in the New Testament and subsequently, the apostle's unusual linguistic background in Bethsaida allows for the possibility that he may have been called *Petros* from the start. If so, it is worth pondering the possibility that it was Jesus who applied to him the Aramaic translation *Kēfa* as a new nickname, interpreting his Greek name in Jewish terms and thus ensuring this new appellation's enduring importance" (Bockmuehl, "Simon Peter's Names in Jewish Sources," 76).

the rest of his Gospel John never uses it again, preferring instead to refer to Peter as “Simon,” “Petros” and “Simon Petros”!

Why would John add the name *Cephas* to a Gospel tradition that only knows the name *Petros*? We may assume that he was writing in, or writing to, an area where *Cephas* was being used and was widely known. Once we discover that *Petros* was the name used for Peter in the land of Israel, and that it was a Hebrew name, it becomes clear that John was interpreting a *Cephas* tradition with which people in another area were familiar. John wished to say to his readers in this other area, “Jesus is ‘the lamb of God.’ It was Jesus who gave Simon his new name, *Cephas*.”

4 The “Cephas” Riddle’s Solution

We can solve the “Cephas” riddle by assuming that “Simon,” “Petros” and “Simon Petros” were Hebrew names and that they were native to the land of Israel. They were the names that Peter, his family and contemporaries used in Peter’s native land, the land of Israel.

It becomes more likely that the Gospel of John was written in the Aegean, as some Church Fathers claim,³⁹ where the name *Cephas* was known to the evangelist’s audience. When Paul wrote to Greek audiences in the Aegean and/or to the Aramaic-Greek environs of Antioch, he also referred to Peter by the Greek-Aramaic *Cephas* (e.g. 1 Cor 1:12, “I am of Cephas”). If we assume, as do many, that the *Petros* texts are secondary and directed towards a Gentile audience, we would predict that we would meet the name “Petros” in the Jewish diaspora, but we do not. Rather, there we meet the name *Cephas*. It appears that *Cephas* is a translation of Peter’s native Hebrew nickname פֶּטְרוֹס (*Petros*). Thus, in Greek texts that originated in the land of Israel, we find the name *Petros*, while in texts that originated in or were written to the diaspora, we find the name *Cephas*. כֶּפָּא (*Kepha*) and Κηφᾶς (*Cephas*), the Aramaic and Greek equivalents of the nickname פֶּטְרוֹס, appear to be the names by which Peter went in the Greek- and Aramaic-speaking diaspora. Since *Petros* was unknown as a Greek name,⁴⁰ native Greek speakers probably would have been amused and distracted by the name “stone.”

Assuming that *Petros* is a Hebrew name, we then understand why John used *Cephas* (John 1:42), and why it is so strangely anachronistic. By seeing *Petros*

39 Irenaeus (quoted by Eusebius) wrote that John, the disciple of the Lord, resided in Ephesus after Paul’s death (*Adv. Haer.* 2.22.5; 3.3.4).

40 See n. 3.

as a Hebrew name, we recognize in John a later tradition, which also fits an assumed later date for the writing of John. The reading “*Cephas*” makes sense chronologically: it is a secondary tradition and it shows up in the latest Gospel. “You are Simon, and you will be called *Cephas*” is true historically: at first, Peter’s name was פֶּטְרוֹס (*Petros*). Only after the resurrection, while ministering in the diaspora, did he receive the name כֶּפֶא *Kēphā*–Κηφᾶς (*Kepha–Cephas*). The author of the Gospel of John rewrote the tradition as if it were a renaming in order to create a virtual prophecy: “You will be called *Cephas*”—in fact, Peter *was* already being called *Cephas*.

5 Summary

The פֶּטְרוֹס–פֶּטְרָא midrash in Matt 16:18 (which includes the “I have found a foundation upon which I can build” element) demonstrates that Christian scripture can be read as midrash. The פֶּטְרוֹס–פֶּטְרָא midrash is also evidence that the *Avraham*–פֶּטְרָא midrash is earlier than the first century C.E.

The word πέτρα was borrowed by ancient Hebrew speakers just like the French words *détente*, *gaffe* and *cliché* were borrowed by modern speakers of English. Such loanwords gain currency because they have a special flavor or satisfy a deficiency in the host language. Not only did πέτρα become a Hebrew word, but that Hebrew word is the key word in the *Avraham*–פֶּטְרָא midrash.

It appears that Jesus used his first-called and most-trusted disciple’s nickname to launch his teaching about the פֶּטְרָא on which he would build his Kingdom of Heaven, his community of disciples. He took advantage of the similarity in meaning and sound between פֶּטְרוֹס and פֶּטְרָא to hint at a tradition about Abraham. One can capture the flavor of Jesus’ statement with the translation, “You are Rock, and on this bedrock I will build my community.”⁴¹

41 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, or 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 hints at the *Avraham–petra* midrash—since this midrash speaks of God finding a man (Abraham) on whom he can 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 of disciples), 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:

By adopting a “*Petros* is Hebrew” solution, it becomes possible to understand the riddle of the name *Cephas* in the New Testament, but more importantly this solution allows us to read several New Testament texts in a new light. For example, we are better able to explain the Gospel of John’s use of “*Cephas*” by assuming an Ephesian or Asia Minor provenance for the Gospel. To his readers in Asia Minor, John’s use of “*Cephas*” created a prophecy pointing to Peter’s ministry in the diaspora. By adopting a Hebrew solution to the “*Cephas*” riddle, one also can explain the complete absence of *Cephas* in the Synoptic Gospels. A Hebrew solution also might explain why the author or authors of the Epistles of Peter introduced himself/themselves as Πέτρος (1 Pet 1:1) and Συμεών Πέτρος (2 Pet 1:1), rather than Κηφᾶς (*Cephas*). These epistles, in choosing to use Peter’s Hebrew names rather than his Aramaic-Greek name, thus become more likely to be native to the land-of-Israel.

The *Petros–petra* wordplay probably was originally uttered by Jesus in Hebrew, not Greek or Aramaic.⁴² The argument is this: there is a rabbinic interpretation that contains the Greek loanword *petra*. More importantly, it is attested in a midrashic context in which Abraham is portrayed as a reliable foundation. (Support for the antiquity of this midrash comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls, where the idea of a community built on a solid foundation already existed.) Jesus’ statement to Peter also contains the word *petra*. The similarity in content of the *Avraham–petra* midrash and Jesus’ *Petros–petra* midrash is so great that coincidence seems improbable; it appears likely that Jesus alluded to the rabbinic interpretation, or to the tradition from which it was drawn. If so, he probably said *petra* in Hebrew. If *petra* is Hebrew, then *Petros*, which Jesus paired with *petra*, is also probably Hebrew. The likelihood of this assumption

(1) the word “this” in the phrase “and on this rock” seems to indicate a switch to a subject other than Peter. By using אַתָּה (“on you”), 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 is 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. One could also attempt to merge the two major suggestions: “The parallel [Isa 51:1–2] suggests that Jesus foresees founding a new people, his ‘church,’ on the bedrock of Peter’s confession and leadership” (Evans, *Matthew*, 314).

42 Steven Fassberg’s conclusion to the question he poses in the title of his article, “Which Semitic Language Did Jesus . . . Speak?” is: “it seems most unlikely that Jesus would not have known Hebrew in addition to Aramaic. Not only would he have been able to read from the Torah, but he would have been able also to converse naturally in Hebrew” (280).

is strengthened by evidence from rabbinic sources: Hebrew speakers borrowed the Greek word *petros* and used it as a personal name. If the *Petros–petra* word-play is Hebrew, then Jesus could have delivered his famous utterance to Peter in Hebrew.