

PETER AND “THE ROCK”: A BRIEF EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 16:15-19

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the Greek expression ταύτη τῆ πέτρα, “this rock,” and examine to whom or to what it refers in the text of Matthew 16:15-19. A brief overview of the main arguments regarding the phrase ταύτη τῆ πέτρα in Matthew is offered, following an exegetical examination of this passage. The article has demonstrated that the phrase “this rock” (ταύτη τῆ πέτρα) is in parallel to Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah, The Son of The Living God, and as an implication, the church rests upon this solid and unique foundation.

Keywords: Biblical theology. Exegesis. New Testament.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo explorar a expressão grega ταύτη τῆ πέτρα, “esta rocha”, e examinar a quem ou a que ela se refere no texto de Mateus 16:15-19. Uma breve visão geral dos principais argumentos relativos à frase ταύτη τῆ πέτρα em Mateus é oferecida, seguida de um exame exegético desta passagem. O artigo demonstra que a frase “esta rocha” (ταύτη τῆ πέτρα) é paralela à confissão de Pedro de que Jesus é o Messias, O Filho do Deus Vivo e, a implicação é que a igreja repousa sobre este sólido e único fundamento.

Palavras-chave: Teologia bíblica. Exegese. Novo Testamento.

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Matthew was the favorite book of the early church (WRIGHT, BIRD, 2019, p. 588). In the early centuries, it was the most quoted, copied, read, and preached Christian book. Matthew portrays Jesus as a new Moses and the long-awaited Davidic deliverer, the Messiah of

Israel, the Emmanuel, the living incarnation of Israel’s God (WRIGHT, BIRD, 2019). This revelation comes to a climax in Peter’s words: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). After Peter’s recognition of Jesus as the Messiah comes a passage that has become one of the most disputed and controversial passages in the Scripture (BOXALL, 2019, p. 248): “I tell you, you are Peter, and on *this rock*, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18). The problem with this declaration lies in the Greek words *ταύτη τῆ πέτρα* (“this rock”)¹. One group of scholars (MEYER, 1880, p. 418-419; NEWMAN, STINE, 1992, p. 522; HAGNER, 1995, p. 469-470; NOLLAND, 2005, p. 668-670; HARRINGTON, 2007, p. 247-248; DAVIES, ALLISON JR., 2004, p. 623-627; OSBORNE, 2010, p. 627; MANGUM, 2020; QUARLES, 2022, p. 408-417) understands this expression as pointing to Peter as the church’s foundation. A second group thinks that Jesus is “this rock” and the church’s foundation (NICHOL, 1980, p. 430; JOBES, 2011, p. 319). And a third group believes that “this rock” refers to Peter’s confession that Jesus is indeed the Messiah (LENSKI, 1961, p. 625-626; CARAGOUNIS, 1990, p. 108-113; GARLAND, 2001, p. 173; HARRIS, 2012, p. 142; MCIVER, 2022, p. 1262).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Greek expression *ταύτη τῆ πέτρα* (“this rock”) and to determine to whom or to what it refers in the text of Matthew. We will begin with a brief overview of the main arguments regarding the phrase *ταύτη τῆ πέτρα*. The next chapter will deal with the exegesis. In conclusion, I will present the interpretation I believe best reflects the biblical context and data.

1 OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN ARGUMENTS FOR THE MEANING OF “THIS ROCK”

1.1 “THIS ROCK” AS A REFERENCE TO PETER

One group of scholars argues in favor of reading “this rock” (*ταύτη τῆ πέτρα*) as referring to Peter himself. For example, Heinrich Meyer (1880, p. 418-419) says the emphasis is on *ταύτη*, which points to Peter and should be understood that way. Then he gives the reason, “because on

¹ For the development of the history of the interpretation of Matt 16:13-20, see Lange e Schaff (2008, p. 296-298); Boxall (2019, p. 248-254).

no other than on ‘this rock,’ – hence the feminine form in this instance is not so much a matter of name as the thing which it indicates, i.e., of that rocky element in the apostle’s character which furnished so solid a foundation for the superstructure of the church that was to be built upon it”.

Grant Osborne (2010) says the question behind Matthew 16:18 has been argued since the Reformation because Roman Catholics saw Peter as the foundation of apostolic succession and the papacy². Nevertheless, he says, this is insufficient justification for rejecting the most obvious understanding. That is, according to Osborne (2010), the majority today recognize Peter is the rock here. Behind the rock metaphors “are images that relate first to the temple, the foundation stone, in terms of its stability and permanence. [...] Peter as the rock prepares for the two promises that follow. Jesus is the builder (οικοδομέω) and cornerstone, but Peter is the first leader/rock/foundation on whom Jesus erects the superstructure” (OSBORNE, 2010, p. 627-628). John Nolland (2005, p. 670) has a similar thought by affirming Peter had the privilege of being named as the church’s foundation. Because he holds some preeminence among the apostles, he is called upon to perform an unrepeatable function. There is a legitimate claim to exclusivity here, but it does not provide a specific location for a successor.

Donald Hagner (1995, p. 469-470) says Peter receives a significant declaration from Jesus: σὺ εἶ Πέτρος (“you are Peter”), meaning that Peter is also the “rock” on which Jesus the Messiah will build his community. The wordplay is evident in the Greek (Πέτρος [*Petros*], “Peter [lit. ‘stone’]”—πέτρα [*petra*], “rock”). This makes Peter’s name even more significant³.

Davies and Allison Jr. (2004, p. 627) say the plausible explanation lies in that *kephā*, the Aramaic, presumably is behind both Πέτρος and πέτρα, and it was used with different nuances⁴.

² According to Charles Quarles, fearing that the interpretation would somehow support the authority of the Roman Catholic papacy, some people oppose identifying Peter as the rock. But Jesus is talking about a person here, not an office. The statement cannot be taken as implying Peter’s infallibility because the very next parable (Matt 16:21–23) demonstrates that even after Jesus’ pronouncement, Peter was capable of the grossest kind of error and held views that were more demonic than divine. Furthermore, he never implies that Peter holds an office that can be passed on to successors who will fulfill the same role and exercise the same authority. See Quarles, *Matthew*, 414. “At any rate, there is obviously nothing in these verses of the distinctively Catholic doctrines of the papacy, apostolic succession, or Petrine infallibility or of the Protestant penchant for Christian personality cults” (BLOMBERG, 1992, p. 256).

³ Also, Douglas Mangum (2020, p. 13-20) says, “Jesus proceeds to use a play on words with the Greek word ‘rock’ and the nickname Peter. It is unlikely that ‘this rock’ refers to anything other than Peter, [...] Jesus declares that Peter will play a foundational role in the new redeemed messianic community”.

⁴ Also, “Aramaic, however, would not distinguish between masculine and feminine forms, so the result would be ‘You are *kefa*, and on this *kefa* I will build [...]’” (NEWMAN, STINE, 1992, p. 522). Daniel J. Harrington (2007, p. 247-248) states, “In Matt 10:2, Simon is said to have been called ‘Peter.’ In Greek, there is a play on the name *Petros* and the word *petra* (‘rock’). In Aramaic, the play is more perfect on *kephā*. Peter/Cephas may not have been a proper

“When translated into Greek, the masculine form *petros* would lend itself as a more likely designation of a person (Simon)” (DAVIES, ALLISON JR., 2014, p. 627)⁵. The authors add that “a literary variant, the feminine *petra*, [...] [represented] an aspect of him that was to be played upon” (DAVIES, ALLISON JR., 2004, p. 627).

Quarles (2017 p. 414) says the masculine noun Πέτρος (Peter) and the feminine noun πέτρα (rock) refer to Peter because, firstly, “the masculine noun had fallen into disuse in the New Testament era but was required when used as a name for a man. Thus, the shift in gender is the expected way of identifying Peter as the rock”. Secondly, “if a distinction between two rocks were intended, an adversative conjunction and/or a remote demonstrative pronoun would have made this explicit, but Jesus used a coordinating conjunction and a proximate demonstrative pronoun instead” (QUARLES, 2017, p. 414). He concludes that “though Peter is the foundation of the church [...] Jesus describes himself as the builder and owner or gatherer of the church (‘I will build my church’) and the builder is obviously superior to the foundation. Peter’s role is crucial, but it in no way rivals Jesus’s own position” (QUARLES, 2017, p. 414).

1.2 “THIS ROCK” AS A REFERENCE TO JESUS

Other scholars read “this rock” (ταύτη τῆ πέτρα) as referring to Jesus being the church’s foundation. It should be noted this argument is defended from a broader theological perspective rather than specifically from the exegesis of the text.

The fact that no one who heard Christ speak, not even Peter⁶, interpreted his words as referring to Peter, either while Christ was on earth or later, is perhaps the most convincing proof

name but rather a nickname, which perhaps had some connection with Peter’s personal characteristics (‘Rocky’). The Greek name “Peter” (πετρός) translates the Aramaic term *Cephas* (John 1:42; 1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Gal 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14), which means “rock” (Quarles, 2017, p. 414).

⁵ Richard Bauckham estimates that “15.6% of men bore one of the two most popular male names, Simon and Joseph,” and Simon was the “most popular male name among Palestinian Jews between 330 BCE–200 CE” (BAUCKHAM, 2006, p. 71, 84-85). Quarles asserts that “the popularity of the name Simon was likely due to patriotism since Simon was the name of one of Mattathias’s five sons who revolted against Seleucid rule over Israel and restored Israel’s independence after nearly half a millennium of foreign domination”. “The yoke of the gentiles was removed from Israel” as “the first year of Simon the great high priest and commander and leader of the Jews” (1 Macc 13:41-42). Since the name Simon was so common, the disciple was identified more specifically by adding an Aramaic patronymic which means “son of Jonah” (QUARLES, 2017, p. 413).

⁶ Karen Jobes (2011, p. 319) says, “Had Peter understood Jesus to mean that Peter would be the rock on which the church would be built (Matt. 16:18), his teaching about the church’s cornerstone in 1 Peter 2:4–10 would surely have

that Christ did not appoint Peter as the “rock” on which he would build his church. If Christ had made Peter the leader of the disciples, they would not have argued over who “should be accounted the greatest” after that (Luke 22:24; Matt. 18:1; Mark 9:33–35; etc.). Jesus here affirms that nothing less than a πέτρα, or “rock” could serve as a foundation for any structure. It is evident that a Πέτρος, or small stone, would be an impossible foundation (NICHOL, 1980, p. 432).

Francis Nichol (1980, p. 430-431) argues in favor of Jesus Christ as the “rock of our salvation”. He says Jesus alone is the foundation of the church, for no “other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11), “neither is there salvation in any other” (Acts 4:12). But Jesus is ever and only *the* “rock” on which the entire structure rests, for without him there would be no church at all. For Nichol, the key is to realize that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, as Peter emphasized at this time (Matt. 16:16), which opens the door to salvation. Karen Jobes completes this idea by saying that God made a grand construction project announcement centuries before Jesus arrived. In Isaiah 28:16-17, the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus are the laying of that Stone on which the church is founded, as Peter says in 1 Peter 2:5 (JOBES, 2011, p. 319).

However, Peter’s recognition and declaration of his faith as the spokesperson for all the disciples on this occasion is incidental, not essential (v. 16) (NICHOL, 1980, p. 430-431).

1.3 “THIS ROCK” AS A REFERENCE TO PETER’S CONFESSION

However, other scholars argue ταύτη τῆ πέτρα (“this rock”) is a reference to Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah. The main reasons behind this conclusion are outlined below.

Murray observes the Greek referent in πέτρος and πέτρα does not need to be identical, but the presence of ταύτη is “decidedly awkward” (HARRIS, 2012, p. 142) if it is a reference to πέτρος.

Lenski (1961, p. 625) makes the same observation. He says the person of Peter “Πέτρος” and αὕτη ἡ πέτρα, “this rock,” are not the same. He states αὕτη ἡ πέτρα “does not signify the Apostle Peter” (LENSKI, 1961, p. 625). Interestingly, the author observes the linguistic datum supports another consideration (LENSKI, 1961, p. 625). If Jesus had Peter in mind by “this rock,”

at least hinted at that. As it is, Peter does not even give himself an honored place in the spiritual building of which Christ is the living cornerstone”.

Jesus could easily have said, “ἐπί σου, ‘on you’ I will build my church; or, ‘on you, Peter,’ adding his name” (LENSKI, 1961, p. 625)⁷. The rhetorical conclusion is, “but Jesus did not.” This addition is not in the text.

The feminine term ταύτη ἡ πέτρα indicates what made Peter a rock. “That was, of course, not his confession but the divine revelation from which that confession sprang and to which Jesus refers so significantly in v. 17” (LENSKI, 1961, p. 626).

Murray makes a similar observation that ταύτη is looking back to “an ‘implied τοῦτο’” (HARRIS, 2012, p. 142) as the “content of the confession in v. 16 with ἀπεκάλυψεν, and v. 17 in a case of ‘construction according to sense’” (HARRIS, 2012, p. 142). Meaningfully, the church’s early history reveals that “Jesus is the Messiah” was the first fundamental Christological belief (ὁ Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς, Acts 18:5, 28; cf. Acts 2:36; 9:22; 17:3) (HARRIS, 2012, p. 142). This view holds that the expression ταύτη ἡ πέτρα refers to Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, therefore, the foundation of the church.

Each of the three explanations has been supported by persuasive arguments. The best way to determine what Christ meant by ταύτη τῆ πέτρα is to look at the text itself. The next chapter will deal with the exegesis of this passage.

2 AN EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 16:15-19 – “THIS ROCK”

The last chapter briefly discussed the three main interpretations of the phrase “this rock” (ταύτη τῆ πέτρα) in Matthew 16:15-19. The first understands “this rock” as a reference to Peter, the second argues in favor of Jesus as the church founder, and the third considers the foundation Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Persuasive arguments have been presented to support each of these three explanations. The goal of this chapter is to examine the phrase ταύτη τῆ πέτρα, as it seems to be the crucial point here in Matthew 16:15-19.

This chapter is split into three parts. The first will briefly examine the literary context of this passage and translate the text. The second will succinctly consider the wordplay. The third will exegete the pericope of Matthew 16:15-19.

⁷ See also Caragounis (1990, p. 89) e Garland (2001, p. 173).

2.1 LITERARY CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 16:15-19

The context of Matthew 16:15-19, as our pericope, is part of a larger block of material within the narrative of Matthew’s Gospel. First, the Jewish leaders’ requesting a sign from Jesus (16:1-4; see also 12:38) closes the various disagreements Matthew has described between Jesus and Jewish leaders (see 9:34; 12:22–24; 15:11-20). Second, the disciples’ confusion over bread in 16:5-12 demonstrates their ongoing struggle to comprehend and believe in Jesus and his authority. Third, the literary structure of this pericope (16:15-19) is dominated by a dialogue between two parts (16:13-16), consisting of two questions. Part one, referring to the public perception of Jesus’ identity (vv. 13-14) and part two, the disciple’s perception (vv. 15-16). Peter’s explicit confession of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah is central here. It also marks Jesus’ ministry pinnacle in Galilee (4:17-16:20)⁸. After Peter’s confession, the beatitude occurs (v. 17), consisting of the Father as the source of Peter’s revelation (v. 17). Jesus’ declaration regarding “upon this rock” (v. 18) because of Jesus’ declaration – the new authority granted to Peter, indirectly to the disciples and the “future church” (v. 19) – with its two parts: the keys of the kingdom, and the authority to bind and loose. Finally, Jesus gives the command for silence regarding his messianic identity (v. 20).

Fourth, Peter and the other disciples do not comprehend the kind of Messiah Jesus has come to be, as evidenced by the fact this confession is made right before Jesus’ first prediction of His passion (16:21) and Peter’s subsequent rebuke (16:22). The character and destiny of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah will be made abundantly clear in Matthew (16:21–28:20). But first, Jesus will take Peter’s confession and announce the foundation of his upcoming “church” (Matt. 16:18) (BROWN, 2015, p. 184)⁹.

⁸ Charles Quarles (2017, p. 407-408) has a beautiful statement that the geographical setting for Peter’s confession “is significant for two reasons. First, Caesarea was predominantly gentile territory, and Jesus’s presence there implies his continuing ministry to gentiles. Second, a place devoted to the honor of the emperor was a very appropriate place for the confession of Jesus’s identity as Messiah, the king whose kingdom would ultimately bring about the end of all other earthly kingdoms. The declaration by Peter in this well-known location implies that Jesus is the true God-ordained king, and his kingdom is superior to Caesar’s empire”.

⁹ See also Mangum (2020, p. 13-20); Wright and Bird (2019, p. 596); and Osborne (2010, p. 623-624).

Text and translation of Matthew 16:15-19

VS	MY DIAGRAM	MY TRANSLATION
15a	λέγει αὐτοῖς ·	He said to them:
15b	ὁμοῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι;	But you, who do you[pl] say that I am?
16a	ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ Σίμων Πέτρος εἶπεν ·	and answering Simon Peter said:
16b	σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος.	You are The Messiah, The Son of The Living God
17a	Ἐποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῷ ·	and answering Jesus said to him:
17b	μακάριος εἶ, Σίμων <u>Βαριωνᾶ</u> ,	blessed are you Simon, <u>son of [Bar]Jonah</u>
17c	ὅτι σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα οὐκ ἀπεκάλυψέν σοι	because flesh and blood did not reveal [this] to you
17d	ἀλλ' ὁ πατήρ μου	but my Father
17e	ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.	who [is] in the heavens.
18a	καὶ ἐγὼ δὲ σοὶ λέγω	I also say to you
18b	ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος,	that you are Peter,
18c	καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ <u>οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν</u>	and upon this rock <u>I will build my congregation</u>
18d	καὶ πύλαι ᾄδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς.	and the gates of death [Hades] will not overcome it.
19a	δώσω σοὶ τὰς κλεῖδας τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν,	I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heavens,
19b	καὶ ὃ ἐὰν δήσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς	and whatever you bind on earth
19c	ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,	it will be bound in the heavens,
19d	καὶ ὃ ἐὰν λύσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς	and whatever you loose on earth
19e	ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.	it will be loose in the heavens.

The above structure indicates a correspondence between 16a-b and 18a-e, suggesting the dialogue between Jesus and Peter is the focus of this passage. To understand the meaning of this dialogue, it is necessary to engage in the exegetical enterprise. However, before starting the exegesis, it is essential to consider the wordplay between כִּפָּא and πέτρα.

2.2 THE WORDPLAY ARGUMENT: CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN כִּפָּא AND ΠΕΤΡΑ

It has been generally accepted that Πέτρος in Matthew 16:18 depends upon an Aramaic original, כִּפָּא. Additionally, owing to a particular theory of what constitutes wordplay, the presumed Aramaic original behind the Greek word πέτρα has often been considered as the key to understanding the passage. However, the Aramaic evidence does not seem as unequivocal as usually claimed to be because πέτρα and כִּפָּא do not share an exact correspondence.

Chrys Caragounis (1990, p. 9-44) elaborated an extensive study on the philological evidence of כִּיפָא as a correspondence to πέτρα. His main conclusion is that one should not base the argument solely on the correspondence of these terms¹⁰. He says that “in the Aramaic Targums, the masculine כִּיפָא (notice Greek πέτρα is feminine) translates preponderantly to Hebrew קֶלֶע (LXX: πέτρα) and less frequently אֶבֶן (LXX: λίθος).” Hebrew צֶיֶר (LXX: πέτρα) is never translated by Aramaic כִּיפָא. Aramaic כִּיפָא shows fluidity in meaning and a clear tendency to take on the sense of “stone.” In this, it corresponds to the latter history of πέτρα, which also comes to signify “stone.” The evidence indicates the correspondence between πέτρα and כִּיפָא is ambiguous, to say the least, and could not be used to solve the problem in Matthew 16:18 (CARAGOUNIS, 1990, p. 30). The author warns “the only solid basis we have is the Greek, and that is unequivocal as to the distinction between Petros and Petra” (CARAGOUNIS, 1990, p. 43).

2.3 EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 16:15-19

In verse 15, Jesus asks a profound and significant question about his identity, emphasizing the significance of this dialogue. The personal pronoun, second-person plural ὑμεῖς clarifies the question is directed to all the disciples.

The “you are” (σὺ εἶ) in 16b and the “you are” (σὺ εἶ) in 18b highlight the central part of the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. It seems the participle ἀποκριθεὶς in verses 16a and 17a is in parallel (sandwich). This literary structure underscores the central theme is Peter’s confession is that Jesus is the Christ. It is evident the most central unit is v. 16b and its development in 18c. The implications suggest the text is concerned with the person and revelation of Jesus rather than the person of Peter.

In verse 16b, the definite article is important and serves to identify (WALLACE, 1996, p. 216; CARAGOUNIS, 1990, p. 86) Jesus with a concrete and unique figure of Jewish eschatology and as the divine Son of God. It seems to contrast 18b, where the anarthrous Πέτρος stands alone as the predicate of the verb εἰμί.

¹⁰ It appears that many scholars based their arguments on Oscar Cullman’s study, and for some reason, they have not weighed all the contrary pieces of evidence. See Cullmann (1964, p. 95-99).

In verse 17b, the word Βαριωνᾶ is a transliteration form of the Aramaic (בַּר יוֹנָה) *Bar-Jona* (meaning “son of Jonah”) (BAUER, 2000, p. 167) and a vocative as an apposition to Σίμων. The implication is, why was the Aramaic used clearly here and doubtfully in 18c πέτρα?

In verse 18a, καὶ γὰρ is formed by crasis from the conjunction¹¹ καὶ and the first personal pronoun ἐγώ. ἐγώ here is the nominative subject of λέγω, and καὶ works as an adjunctive (WALLACE, 1996, p. 671) conjunction looking back to 16:16a “δὲ Σίμων Πέτρος εἶπεν.” The word δέ (18a) is an adjunctive conjunction used emphatically to mark the development of the dialogue and must be translated as “also”¹², strengthening the parallel with 16a. It creates a connection between both verses. The implication is that what Peter answered in 16a(b) is inwardly connected with what Jesus answered in 18a (b c).

In 18b, ὅτι introduces the clausal complement indirect discourse of λέγω translated as *that*. It denotes a mental or sense perception, or an act of the mind, to indicate the content of what is said¹³. It suggests Jesus refers to Peter to underline what Peter just said: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” (σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος).

What was revealed (ἀποκαλύπτω) to him was an extraordinary revelation by Jesus’ Father (ὁ πατήρ μου) and not something from “flesh and blood” (σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα οὐκ), as Peter is.

Based on that, the preposition ἐπὶ is used as a marker of ταύτη τῇ πέτρᾳ, the place where Jesus will build his “μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν.”

The demonstrative pronoun “this” (ταύτη) seems to be used as an adjective pertaining to an entity perceived in the discourse¹⁴ — the articular noun τῇ πέτρᾳ¹⁵ — whose primary meaning is

¹¹ According to Wallace (1996, p. 668), conjunctions are important in exegesis because they relate a passage’s thoughts to one another. And important to determining their use is identifying the two sets of ideas that the conjunction links together. One must determine the main idea “the conjunction modifies, that is, the element in the sentence or larger literary unit to which the conjunction is to be connected. Often more than one possible connection exists. When this situation occurs, context and authorial expression are two key ways to determine the most likely connection”.

¹² BDAG, s.v. “δέ,” p. 213.

¹³ BDAG, s.v. “ὅτι,” p. 731.

¹⁴ Garland (2001, p. 147) points that “the pronoun ‘this’ [is used] to refer to what Peter said. It also fits the context, which concerns the identity of Jesus, not the significance of Peter”.

¹⁵ The word πέτρα appears 14 times in the New Testament (*Accordance Bible Software*). It is used seven times in a literal sense in Matt 27:51, 60. In Mark 15:46 it is used in the context of the burial of Jesus; in Luke 8:6, 13 in the parable of the sower; in Rev 6:15-16 in the context of the sixth seal; seven times metaphorically in Matt 7:24-25; in Luke 6:48 referring to the two foundations in Jesus’ discourse; in Matt 16:18 in the dialogue between Peter and Jesus; in Rom 9:33, Jesus the stumbling stone is an allusion to Isa 8:13-14, 28:16; in 1 Cor 10:4 Jesus the rock in Israel’s desert is a reference to Exodus 17:5-7 and Numbers 20:11; and in 1 Peter 2:8 Jesus the stumbling stone is an allusion to Isaiah 28:16.

bedrock or massive rock formations, *rock*¹⁶ as distinguished from¹⁷ πέτρος, “stone”¹⁸. Charles Quarles (2017, p. 188) says that πέτρος could be used interchangeably with πέτρα because “the masculine form had fallen into disuse in the NT era”. Strangely, he does not show any evidence to support his claim. Rather, he affirms “that the masculine form appears 156 times in the NT, every example is as a name for Simon” (QUARLES, 2017, p. 188). In other words, Πέτρος is never used in the feminine form. Moreover, the absence of the definite article in Πέτρος (v. 18b) indicates this is not an answer to any concrete question as to who Peter is¹⁹. Rather, it implies a connection to another articular ὁ χριστός in 16b.

Interestingly, “the article was originally derived from the demonstrative pronoun. And its original force was to *point out* something. It has largely kept the force of drawing attention to something” (WALLACE, 1996, p. 208). If this is the case and not an exaggeration, it seems that the article τῆ “the” here points or refers back to the implied relative pronoun τοῦτο as the “content of the confession of v. 16”²⁰.

It does not appear that Πέτρος fits as the content of πέτρα. Rather, it looks like πέτρος and πέτρα are put here to indicate a distinction between both terms²¹. The wordplay is similar in the sound, but dissimilar in the meaning or specific reference²². In other words, it forms a melodious sound, like the alliterations used in a speech or sermon, rather than a theological declaration.

Remarkably, Peter, years after the event described in Matthew 16, used πέτρα in 1 Peter 2:8 to clearly allude to Christ as “the rock” predicted in Isaiah 28:16. Here was a good place and moment to declare to the Christian community that Jesus had appointed him as “the rock,” the foundation of the church, but he did not; rather he exalted Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ Wilcox (cited in Buchanan, 3006, p. 691) proposes that “the term ‘rock’ in the OT refers to God rather than a human being. In later literature it applies to the Messiah or king. For example, as an interpretation of Psalms 118:22, ‘The rock which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner,’ the rabbis said, ‘the child whom the builders abandoned has appeared among the sons of Jesse and merits becoming a king and ruler’ (Targum Jonathan Psalm 118:22)”.

¹⁷ BDAG, s.v. “πέτρος,” p. 809.

¹⁸ BDAG, s.v. “πέτρος,” p. 809.

¹⁹ Explaining about the use of the article, Wallace (1996, p. 209-210) says “The basic function and force is to conceptualize or identifies and used predominantly to stress the identity of an individual or class or quality”. This does not appear to be the case with Πέτρος.

²⁰ Harris (2012, p. 142) observes that ταύτη is looking back to “an ‘implied τοῦτο’” as “the content of the confession of v. 16 with ἀπεκάλυψεν in v. 17 in a case of ‘construction according to sense’”.

²¹ Each of the two words in the wordplay has a different reference meaning. The wordplay Πέτρος fits as the content of πέτρα *and* has similarities and dissimilarities. Πέτρος makes a declaration about the πέτρα, but τῆ πέτρα is not Πέτρος (CARAGOUNIS, 1990, p. 90; GARLAND, 2001, p. 173).

²² “The similarity is “in the sound and general sense”. The dissimilarity is in the meaning or specific reference. *Petros*, a man’s nickname, refers to a stone; *petra* refers to bedrock, the content of his confession (CARAGOUNIS, 1990, p. 109). The assertion “you are Peter” is a solemn affirmation formula to introduce what follows: “As sure as you are

Peter’s confession in 16b is crucial for this discussion. Jesus takes Peter’s response as a direct revelation from God. In other words, what Peter receives is a revelation of Jesus’ character. It shows the significance of Jesus in the narrative for his people, the Jews, and for the future community he will establish.

The confession of Peter has twofold implications. First, Jesus is the Messiah (ὁ χριστός), the leader of God’s people (Jews), which sets the stage for Jesus’s concentration on Jerusalem and the fate awaiting him there. Second, Jesus is the Son of the Living God²³ (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος)²⁴. It defines Jesus as more than a human figure: he is the manifestation of God, someone who participates in God’s being (HAGNER, 1995, p. 468). It qualifies him to make the solemn declaration he will build “my congregation” (μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν).

In response to Peter’s confession, Jesus answers using three verbs in the future active indicative. In verse 18cd, the verb οἰκοδομήσω (“to construct a building, build”)²⁵ is a predictive future, but it seems to express a promise. The term ἐκκλησία occurs three times in Matthew (16:17 twice, and 16:18), meaning “assembly, community, congregation.”²⁶ Jesus’ use of the personal pronoun μου to describe this congregation suggests that Jesus will form a new or renewed congregation. Mou is probably a possessive genitive (WALLACE, 1996, p. 81-83), indicating Jesus will gather this new people, which will belong to God. The second κατισχύσουσιν (“to be dominant, prevail or to have the capability to defeat, win a victory over”)²⁷ expresses the certainty of victory over the devil works. And the third δώσω, in verse 19a, has the sense of “to put something in care of another, entrust”²⁸, as a consequence of Peter’s confession. So, affirming that Peter would be the church’s foundation sounds odd because a human being does not seem to be a suitable foundation for God’s future church.

Matthew 16:19 marks the conclusion of the dialogue. It was said the question Jesus asked in 16:15b was directed to all disciples, but Peter was the first to answer the question as a

[called] *Petros*, on this rock of what you have just said I will build my church” (CARAGOUNIS, 1990, p. 108-113; GARLAND, 2001, p. 173).

²³ For the background of “Son of God” in the OT and rabbinic literature see Quarles (2017, p. 410-412); Nolland (2005, p. 662-665); 4Q174; 4Q246 2:1.

²⁴ Quarles (2017, p. 412) observes that the only other occurrence of the phrase “the living God” is in Matt 26:63 in the adjuration of Jesus by the high priest. The title “the living God” is a simple substitute for the divine name.

²⁵ BDAG, s.v. “οἰκοδομέω,” p. 696.

²⁶ BDAG, s.v. “ἐκκλησία,” p. 303.

²⁷ BDAG, s.v. “κατισχύω,” p. 534.

²⁸ BDAG, s.v. “δίδωμι,” p. 242.

representative of the disciples. Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah becomes the central point in vv.16b-19e. So, what Peter receives is the fruit of God’s revelation (17d), and based on Peter’s confession (16b), Jesus will build his congregation (18c). Thus, as a sign of this blessing (μακάριος 17c), Peter, as a representative of the disciples, will receive “the keys of the kingdom of the heavens” (19a-e)²⁹, as a symbol of the divine authority for the future congregation Jesus will build. Peter, the disciples, and the future generations of believers will be Jesus’ stewards (QUARLES, 2017, p. 416-417) and ambassadors, in Peter’s words — “a royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9). Intriguingly, the same authority is granted to or bestowed on the leaders and members of God’s church today. In Matthew 16:20 Jesus commands his disciples to keep this revelation in secret³⁰, and it marks the conclusion of this pericope.

So, to what does πέτρα refer? It is hard to deny that “rock” (πέτρα) is a reference to what Peter said to Jesus. Peter’s confession makes crystal clear Jesus is God’s anointed Messiah, which sets Peter and the other disciples apart from the unbelieving Jews. And, in Matthew’s account, exerts a constraining influence on Jesus to come to terms with his hard calling to direct his steps to the place of duty, seeing behind Peter’s words his Father’s affirmation of his mission and office. As a result of this confession, Jesus “will build His congregation, and the gates of death will not overcome it”. This is a piece of persuasive and convincing evidence that πέτρα refers to Peter’s confession (LENSKI, 1961, p. 625-626; CARAGOUNIS, 1990, p. 108-113; GARLAND, 2001, p. 173; HARRIS, 2012, p. 142; MCIVER, 2022, p. 1262) and sets the foundation of Jesus’ future church³¹.

²⁹ ἀπεκάλυψέν σοι (17c) ... ὁ πατήρ μου (17d) -> ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν (18c) μακάριος εἶ, Σίμων Βαριωνᾶ (17b) -> δώσω σοι τὰς κλεῖδας τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν (19a)

A similar outline is perceived by Caragounis (1990, p. 105).

³⁰ It would sound odd if Peter was in the spotlight in this passage.

³¹ Despite Matt 7:24 and Matt 16:18 being distant, the parallel is striking. The text of Matt 7:24 has been brought here only to fit as an illustration and to contrast Quarles’ statement. Quarles sounds contradictory in his statement in defense of Peter as “this rock”. He says that “Jesus describes himself as the builder and owner or gatherer of the church (‘I will build my church’), and the builder is obviously superior to the foundation. Peter’s role is crucial, but it in no way rivals Jesus’s own position” (QUARLES, 2017, p. 147).

In Matthew 7:24, ἐπὶ is followed by an accusative τὴν πέτραν and used metaphorically to refer to Jesus’ teachings, his word as the foundation of the house. The builders are characterized as wise (φρόνιμος) or foolish (μωρός), and they are defined in accord with their response to the word of Jesus (τὴν πέτραν), which lays the foundation for their construction οἰκοδομέω. It is clear that the builders are not as significant as the foundation. If in Matthew 7:24 Jesus discloses his teaching, in Matthew 16:18 he reveals his character.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper aimed to explore the Greek expression τούτη τῆ πέτρα, “this rock,” in Matthew 16:15-19, and examine to whom or to what it refers. It was noticed that scholarship is divided between three groups regarding the phrase. The majority believes it refers to Peter as the church’s foundation. Others think that “this rock” is Jesus, and a third group comprehends “this rock” as referring to Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah.

After examining the text, the evidence shows Peter’s confession is the most convincing meaning for “this rock” in Matthew 16:18. First, the focus of the passage is on the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, more specifically, the central unit v. 16b and its development in 18c, in which Peter confesses by God’s revelation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Second, the argument that Πέτρος in Matthew 16:18 depends upon the Aramaic original ܦܿܬܿܪܿܘܿܐ is ambiguous and could not be used to solve the problem; in addition, the wordplay was arranged to mark a distinction and not to state a theological declaration. Finally, the exegesis supports the phrase “this rock” (τούτη τῆ πέτρα) is in parallel to Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah, and the church rests upon this solid and unique foundation.

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