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 ᾅδου 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 16:8, 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.jerusalemperspective.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. Κηφᾶς, 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).

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. Furthermore, it is probable that Jesus taught in Hebrew, not Greek.

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 נוש 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 son of Iostachus at Masada (ostracon no. 413, pre-73) and Patron 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 -ון or -ין 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 Idiomaten des palästinischen Talum, des Onkelostargum und Prophetentargum, und her jerusalemensischen Targume (2nd ed.; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1905)].”