Bam! Bam! The “Pebbles” Argument Goes Down

A bedrock Protestant argument against the Papacy gets reduced to rubble.

The scenario:

You participate in an employee Bible study every day on your lunch hour. This particular Monday, Fred, a new employee, is introduced to the group. He announces he's a former Catholic and is also a part-time minister at a nondenominational “Bible church” in a nearby town.

As you begin, Fred opens his Bible and begins to “explain” why the papacy is “unbiblical.” The other Catholics in the room look to you expectantly. They know you've been attending a Catholic apologetics training course at your parish, and as you look around, you realize you're the only one in the room who is ready to respond.

You take a deep breath and interrupt. “Fred, what exactly is your main objection to the Catholic teaching on the papacy?”

Fred's response is as blunt as it is sincere. “It's unbiblical.”

You grin to hide your nervousness. “Actually, it is biblical, and if you turn to...”

“No, it's not.”

“Yes, it is.”

Man, oh man, this is getting off to a great start, you think to yourself in exasperation as you open your Bible to Matthew 16:17-19 and read aloud: “And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to

you, but My Father Who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' "

"That passage does not refer to Peter as the rock!" Fred emphatically declares. "Contrary to the erroneous Catholic interpretation, it refers to Christ as the rock. For 30 years, I believed that Peter was the rock, but then I found the original Greek proves he wasn't. There's a distinction between the two "rocks" in Greek. The text actually reads, 'You are petros,' which means small pebble, 'and on this petra,' which means massive boulder, 'I will build My Church.' The first rock is Peter, the second rock is Christ. See? Christ didn't build the Church on Peter, but on Himself."

Your response:

"I understand your argument, but there are problems with it. Petros is simply the masculine form of the feminine Greek noun petra. Like Spanish and French, Greek nouns have gender. So when the female noun petra, large rock, was used as Simon's name, it was rendered in the masculine form as petros. Otherwise, calling him Petra would have been like calling him Michelle instead of Michael, or Louise instead of Louis."

"Wrong." Fred shakes his head. "Petros means a little rock, a pebble. Christ didn't build the Church on a pebble. He is the Rock, the petra, the big boulder the Church is built on."

You take a deep breath, calm your nerves a little, and continue. "Well, what would you say if I told you that even Protestant Greek scholars like D.A. Carson and Joseph Thayer admit there is no distinction in meaning between petros and petra in the Koine Greek of the New Testament? [Joseph H. Thayer, Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 507; D.A. Carson, "Matthew," in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), vol. 8, 368.] As you pointed out, petra means a 'rock.' It even usually means a 'large rock.' And that's exactly what petros means, too — large rock. It does not mean 'pebble' or 'small stone,' as you've been told. The Greek word for 'pebble' or 'small stone' is lithos, not petros.

"In Matthew 4:3," you continue, "the devil cajoles Jesus to perform a miracle and transform some stones, lithoi, the Greek plural for lithos, into bread. In John 10:31, certain Jews pick up stones, lithoi, to stone Jesus with. In 1 Peter 2:5, St. Peter describes Christians as 'living stones,' lithoi, which form a spiritual house. If St. Matthew had wanted to draw a distinction between a big rock and a little rock in Matthew 16:17-19, he could have by using lithos, but he didn't. The rock is St.

Peter!”

Wilma, the VP of finance and a member of your parish has a thought, “Fred, how do you explain the fact that Jesus addresses St. Peter directly seven times in this short passage? It doesn't make sense that He would address everything to St. Peter and then say, 'By the way, I'm building the Church on Me.' The context seems pretty clear that Jesus gave authority to St. Peter, naming him the rock.”

Fred shakes his head. “I don't think so. And even if petros and petra mean the same thing, Jesus surely made the distinction with His hand gestures or tone of voice when He said, 'You are rock, and on this rock I will build My Church.' “

Betty, another young Catholic in the group, chimes in. “I don't think it's much use to conjecture about what Jesus' hand gestures or voice intonations might have been, since we can't know what they were. And doesn't that kind of speculation contradict your belief in the 'Bible alone' theory? Anyway, speculation aside, we do know that Jesus definitely said, 'You are rock, and on this rock I will build My Church.' Going from the text alone, His meaning seems crystal-clear to me.”

You notice several heads nodding in agreement. Fred's isn't one of them. “But getting back to the Greek, Fred,” you say, “notice Matthew used the demonstrative pronoun taute, which means 'this very,' when he referred to the rock on which the Church would be built: 'You are Peter, and on taute petra,' this very rock, 'I will build My Church.'

“Also, when a demonstrative pronoun is used with the Greek word for 'and,' which is 'kai,' the pronoun refers back to the preceding noun. In other words, when Jesus says, 'You are rock, and on this rock I will build My Church,' the second rock He refers to has to be the same rock as the first one. Peter is the rock in both cases.

“Jesus could have gotten around it if He'd wanted to. He didn't have to say, 'And,' kai, 'on this rock I will build My Church.' He could've said, 'But,' alla, 'on this rock I will build My Church,' meaning another rock. He would have then had to explain who or what this other rock was. But He didn't do that.”

Fred flips through his Bible. “God says in Isaiah 44:8, 'And you are My witnesses! Is there a God besides Me? There is no Rock; I know not any.' And 1 Corinthians 10:4 says, 'And all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ.' See? These passages tell us Peter could not have been the rock of Matthew 16:17-19. Only God — Christ — is a rock.”

“That's a good point,” you say. “Yes, God is called 'rock' in Isaiah 44:8 and

elsewhere. But notice that just seven chapters later in Isaiah 51:1-2, God Himself calls Abraham the rock from which Israel was hewn. Is this a contradiction? No. Jesus is the one foundation of the Church in 1 Corinthians 3:11, but in Revelation 21:14 and Ephesians 2:20, we're told that the Apostles are the foundation of the Church. Jesus said He is the light of the world in John 9:5, but the Bible also says in Matthew 5:14 that Christians are the light of the world. Jesus is our 'one teacher' in Matthew 23:8, yet in Ephesians 4:11 and James 3:1, it says 'there are many teachers' in the Body of Christ.

“Are these contradictions? Of course not. The Apostles can be the foundation of the Church because they are in Christ, the one Foundation. The Church can be the light of the world because she is in the true Light of the world. A teacher can teach because he is in the one true Teacher, Christ. In the same way, St. Peter is indeed the rock of Matthew 16, and that doesn't detract from Christ being the rock of 1 Corinthians 10:4. St. Peter's 'rock-ness' is derived from Christ.

“Aside from everything we said earlier about the Greek,” you continue, “there's an even stronger case that can be made for Christ meaning Peter was the rock on which He would build His Church. When Jesus gave Simon the name 'Rock,' we know it was originally given in Aramaic, a sister language of Hebrew, and the language that Jesus and the Apostles spoke. And the Aramaic word for 'rock' is *kepha*. This was transliterated in Greek as Cephas or *Kephas*, and translated as *Petros*. In Aramaic, nouns do not have gender as they do in Greek, so Jesus actually said, and St. Matthew first recorded, 'You are *Kephas* and on this *kephas* I will build My Church.' Clearly the same rock both times.

“And just as Greek has a word for 'small stone,' *lithos*, so does Aramaic. That word is *evna*. But Jesus did not change Simon's name to *Evna*, He named him *Kephas*, which translates as *Petros*, and means a large rock.”

“No way,” Fred shakes his head. “There's no evidence in Scripture that Christ spoke in Aramaic or originally gave Simon the name *'Kephas*.' All we have to go on is the Greek, and the Greek says Simon was called *Petros*, a little stone.”

“Actually, Fred, you're mistaken on both counts. The second point we've already discussed, and as far as your first point, well, take a look at John 1:42. 'Jesus looked at [Simon] and said, “So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).' See? St. John knew that the original form of the name was *Kephas*, large rock, and he translated it into Greek as *Petros*, or Peter.”

Just then, your watch beeps 1:00, signaling the end of your lunch hour. You close in a quick prayer, then grab a Catholic apologetics tract from inside your Bible and catch Fred on his way out.

“Hey, Fred,” you smile warmly. “I really appreciate your input in this group, and I'm glad you've joined us. You're going to add a great new dimension to the group. Welcome!” You extend your hand to shake his.

Fred shakes politely, but you can see on his face that he's not pleased with the way the day's discussion went. But he's a good sport and he promises to be back tomorrow for “round two,” as he calls it.

On the way out, you hand him the apologetics tract and smile inwardly at the odd look he gives you as he slips it into his Bible. He's clearly not used to being on the receiving end of a tract, especially not one that's handed to him by a Catholic.

— By Tim Staples

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