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THE ROCK AND THE STONES

PETER said to Jesus, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God"; Jesus answered, "Thou art a Stone and on this Rock I will build my Church". In this antiphon the title Christ is balanced with the Rock; the living Rock on which the Son will build his Congregation, the renewed Israel, which will be raised from the dead. This new Israel is first embodied in Jesus, the Servant, the only begotten Son; then in all who by faith become members of his body.

I heartily agree with the main thesis of Mr. Warren in *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY* for July, 1947; but I think the just contention that the play on *Petros* and *Petra* cannot have been present in Aramaic should be met more boldly than by an appeal to a distinction which might have been indicated by the gender of the pronoun, "*this* Rock" (*Kepha*). As to the Syriac versions I would call attention to Dalman's dictum (*Jesus-Jeshua*, p. 25): "Both Syriac translations endeavour to render the holy original Greek text as literally as possible." Our inferences therefore as to the words used by Christ must be based upon the Greek. But if Rome appeals to Aramaic, to Aramaic let it go.

I am the last person to wish to turn away from a play on words in names: I think it is a very significant guide in the O.T., and that Jesus, in whom the Prophets were fulfilled, would gladly have taken any opportunity to use it. But He could not use it in this case, for there was no possibility in Aramaic for a play, but only for a bald repetition, which would have clouded rather than illuminated His meaning.

At first sight the Roman appeal to Aramaic in support of its Petrine claim appears plausible, *if* one accepts the monstrous addition that what is said to Peter is said also to the Bishops of Rome. If Jesus said, "Thou art *Kepha* and on this *Kepha* I will build", it is natural to infer that He identifies Peter with the Rock foundation. All other considerations are against it, but the actual words seem to require this interpretation; "Thou art Peter and on this Peter I build". There could have been no play on words, nor contrast between stone and rock.

Why then does the Evangelist make such a play and contrast appear in Greek? He might have written *πέτρον*, which would mean, "Thou art a stone and on this stone I will build". This would seem a more reasonable thing for Jesus to have said than "Thou art a rock and on this rock I will build". But the Greek does not properly represent either of these. Why then should it be assumed that the Aramaic repeated *kepha*? It is plain that Jesus said "Thou art *Kepha*" (= *Petros*, a stone; cf. John i. 42); it seems probable then that *πέτρα* (rock) represents the Aramaic *šūr*, which is akin to the Hebrew *šûr*, the word frequently used for the Rock as a symbol for God. The word *šūr* occurs in Dan. ii. 35, 45, where it is translated "mountain", with "rock" as an alternative in R.V. margin. The stone cut without hands became the great Rock-Mountain of the Kingdom of God, which filled the whole earth; an idea which seems akin to the prophecy of Isa. ii=Mic. iv, where the Mountain of Zion is exalted above all the hills, and all peoples flow into it. The connexion of Stone and Rock is not the only point of similarity between Dan. ii and Matt. xvi; for the stone *cut without hands* signifies the same idea as *Petros*, to whom "flesh and blood has not revealed" the mystery of the Kingdom, "but my Father who is in Heaven". The faith of Peter, the first stone, will become the faith of the universal Church, for it is the expression of the word of God which stands for ever. That stone, like the stone which Jacob anointed, will become Bethel, the House of God's Presence on earth, that Temple which is the Body of Christ.

The sequence could be observed. Jesus first asks, "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" Then, "Who say ye that I am?" and then says: "On this Rock I will build." "Son of Man" is reminiscent of Daniel's vision, in which the Son of Man is Israel personified, the Kingdom of God, which consists of Christ and his Saints as one Body. This is identical in substance with the stone cut without hands which became a great mountain, superseding the world-empires. As Jesus speaks of Himself in the third person as the Son of Man, so He speaks of Himself in the third person as this Rock. [For the form of the sentence one may compare "Destroy *this* Temple and in three days *I* will raise it up" (John ii. 19, 21).] "I, Jesus the Son of Man will build on Myself, the Christ the Son of God." In addition to the reference to Daniel there is

a still clearer reference to Isa. viii and xxviii. Chapter viii first insists on Immanuel as the fundamental truth which will stand sure. The Lord of Hosts, manifest as Immanuel, will be a sanctuary, and a stone of stumbling and rock of offence. Isa. xxviii. 13 repeats the words about stumbling: "and they shall be broken and snared and taken". Then in v. 16: "Behold I lay a foundation on Zion a stone: a stone proved, a corner stone; precious foundation founded: he that believes firmly shall not haste" (cf. viii. 17). Perhaps this implies also, "he that makes sure", i.e. the Architect or Master-Builder, shall not haste. This is followed by a warning to the unbelieving rulers of Jerusalem that their covenant with death and agreement with Sheol shall not stand; which has an obvious bearing on "the gates of Sheol shall not prevail against" my congregation.

The natural inference from all this is that the Prophet and Christ both had in mind the Sacred Rock of Mount Zion in the Temple precincts, as a symbol of the truth of Immanuel, the Eternal God revealed as with us; the truth fulfilled in the Son of Man whom Peter had recognised as the Eternal Christ, the Son of God. The Son of God is of one substance with the Father, the Rock. The disciple, in so far as he is regenerated, becomes a partaker of the Divine Nature. The stone firmly cemented to its foundation grows into the same substance as the Rock.

We return to the question: If Jesus said "Thou art *Kepha*, and upon this *Túr* I will build my congregation", why does the Evangelist make a play upon words appear in Greek? The answer is plain. *He could not avoid it.* If the saying is to be translated into Greek the name inevitably becomes *Petros*; no evangelist ever uses *Kephas* except in John i. 42, where he finds it necessary to explain that it "is by interpretation *Petros* (Stone)". Such a parenthesis would have been intolerably clumsy in Matt. xvi. Obviously *λίθος* is out of the question in either context; it was necessary to use the name by which the Apostle was known to Greek-speaking Christians. But then *there is no word* available for *rock* that could be used in Greek prose except *petra*. It is thus not the likeness but the difference between *petros* and *petra* which is significant. The Evangelist has done the best in his power to distinguish between the two words and to represent the distinction between a stone and the

Rock. For it is a simple fact that in normal Greek no translator would ever represent *petros* in English except as stone, or *petra* by anything but rock. It is not the Evangelist's fault that his Greek has indeed proved a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence. Apart from the preposterous Petrine claims of Rome the matter is quite simple. Peter was plainly the *first* foundation stone to be laid upon the Eternal Rock-foundation which lay beneath the New Covenant. He certainly was not this Rock.

Mr. Warren rightly says, "Rock in the O.T. is a synonym for God". One possible exception is in Isa. li. 1 f., where it is usually taken as referring to Abraham. I question this interpretation.¹ But be it so, the Father of the Faithful is a unique person (not one of Twelve Patriarchs like Peter among Twelve Apostles, but the one Arch-patriarch of Israel).

"Rock" is a title for God, as manifesting His help and salvation on earth for Israel: and "that Rock was Christ". In Isa. viii. 10-16 the Rock and Stone seem definitely associated with God as Immanuel. It is at least suggestive that verse 16 may be read, "The Rock a testimony to seal the love among My disciples". The Rock on which the Son of the Living God will build His Congregation is "the Name", the revelation of the Divine Substance, Jesus the Christ. His Congregation is the New Israel: "and the Gates of Sheol shall not prevail against it".

This intuition which Peter had expressed by inspiration from the Father (speaking as he often did on impulse without thought) was this: Jesus, although He was only doing the work of the Servant (rejected of men, to the Jews a stumbling block) and not the works of the Christ, the King of all nations, yet was indeed the Christ. (Matt. xi. 1-6 may be profitably compared. Was John perplexed as to whether Jesus was Elijah?) Although Peter had only seen the acorn, in a flash of timeless inspiration he saw it as the oak. For Jesus was the Christ in

¹ "The Rock ye hewed" means the same as "Me (Him) whom ye pierced" in Zech. xii. 10. (See my *En-Roch*, p. 370.) It is also worth observing the curious expression in Deut. xxxii. 13, "The Rock that begat thee". Peter said, "Thou art the Son of the Living God". Jesus replied, "My Father in heaven has revealed to thee" this truth, as He also said, "No man knows the Son but the Father". Thus "on this Rock" might refer to the Father. The implication would be that Peter, the stone, had, by his faith in the only begotten Son of God, become regenerate, a partaker of the Divine Nature. It is not enough to recognise Jesus as a "Teacher come from God". "Except one be begotten from above he cannot see the Kingdom of God," which is the Kingdom of the Christ, the only begotten Son, born of a Virgin.

the same sense in which David was the King, the Lord's anointed, while Saul yet lived. The Transfiguration, like Peter's confession, was another flash of illumination from the Eternal of the Timeless Truth. It was through the gate of Death and Resurrection and Ascension that Jesus entered on the full exercise of His Christhood in the Heavenly Jerusalem. "From now shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the Right Hand of Power and coming in the Clouds of Heaven." The Old Covenant was not annulled until the High Priest had deliberately rejected Him who was the inheritor of the hope of Israel. From then His little congregation, the Body of the Christ on earth, quickened and raised up by His Spirit and led by Peter, began to establish His Kingdom in the earthly Jerusalem: and the gates of Death did not prevail against it. For gates do not march out to fight: their only function is to shut out the army of the King who comes to claim possession of the city. Perhaps as Jesus spake the words He had in mind how the Jebusites had said to David, "Except thou take away the blind and the lame thou shalt not come in hither"; and how Joab, the Captain of his host, had climbed up through the gates of death, the dark dangerous ascent of the water passages, to capture the city for his Lord, and to throw open the gates for the King to enter in.¹

For, while I reject the play on *Petros-petra* or a repetition of *Kepha-kepha*, I believe there *was* a play on names in the mind of Christ. That blind leader of the blind and lame, the ruler of Jerusalem, the High Priest *Caiaphas*, was fighting to keep the Christ, the heir of the sure mercies of David, out of His inheritance in the city of David, the holy City of God.² "Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." "Thou art Cephas"—and though Caiaphas shut the gates against me and cast me into the jaws of Sheol, thou wilt pass through the gates to claim for me the city, the New Jerusalem, which is to stand upon the twelve stones, the Apostle-Patriarchs of the new tribes of Israel, into which all peoples shall flow.

There is thus a regular sequence of thought running through the whole passage: for He continues: "I will give unto thee the *keys* of the Kingdom of Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt

¹ In relation to gates of death Job xxxviii. 16 f. should be noted as illustrating the allusion to Joab, and Ps. ix. 14 and context. So Isa. xxxviii. 10 is connected with Hezekiah's "resurrection" on the third day, and the psalm or prayer of Jonah is curiously suggestive in the same connection.

² Cephas and Caiaphas are both **כפא** in unpointed Aramaic.

bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven."¹

It is a simple matter of history that Peter was the first Prime Minister and gate-keeper of the New Jerusalem, in the opening of the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. It was he who threw open the doors on the day of Pentecost; it was he who, with John, officially opened the door for the Samaritans; it was he who first opened the door for Cornelius and his fellow-Gentiles, three times recorded in the Acts; it was he whose voice was decisive in winning a quiet hearing for Paul and Barnabas at the Council of Jerusalem, which settled the first great conflict about the terms of admission of the Gentiles by a temporary compromise of binding and loosing.

Peter is a very excellent example of the average man at his best—fundamentally conservative, but capable of an occasional leap towards liberalism. A flash of intuitive imagination once and again illuminates his mind far ahead of his conscious reasoning. Because his *mind* is sluggish and has not firmly grasped the principle, he falls back and loses it for a time and earns rebuke. Through his fall he rises again with a firm conviction and a sure hold on the truth. For to the end he kept the heart of a little child. We may well marvel at the Wisdom of the Master-Builder, the Carpenter, who chose such an one for this critical function in the history of the world. Not only is such an unimaginative type the most trustworthy witness to an abnormal fact like the Resurrection; but a brilliant leader like Stephen or Paul, if set in the foremost place of undisputed authority, could not have waited for the dull-witted average Jew to grasp the principles so plain to brighter intellects. The New Israel would (humanly speaking) have been overwhelmed by the influx of Greek and Egyptian Gnosticism before its first Hebrew stones had been firmly cemented upon the Rock foundation. Even with Peter, the fisherman, at the helm, disaster came perilously near. None but the Master-Builder would have chosen such a stone for such a position. The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner. The Acts shows how exactly he fitted into his allotted place, bonding James and Paul together.

There is another way of approach to this saying which is

¹ On the possible relation of this to Isa. xxii. 20 ff. and, also Isa. xlv. 1 ff. I can only refer to *En-Roch*, pp. 137 f. and 330 ff.

worth considering. The teaching of Jesus was often illustrated from his immediate surroundings. Caesarea Philippi was a stronghold of idolatry, near the source of Jordan at the foot of a spur of Mount Hermon. What a contrast between the Son of Man with his little band of disciples and the great mountain, the magnificent heathen Temple, and the rush of the river bursting through the gates of Sheol. Yet "Thou art a Stone and on this Rock-Mountain I will build my Church and the Gates of Sheol shall not prevail against it". The little hill of Zion shall be exalted above Mount Hermon; the Temple of My Body shall prevail above these great shrines dedicated to Pan and Emperors of Rome; it shall rise up through the gates of Sheol to the heights of Heaven.

So after six days He led the three disciples up to a rocky height of Hermon and was transfigured before them into that form of spiritual body which God has prepared for them that love Him; giving to His chosen witnesses a foresight of the mystery of the glory of the Resurrection.

What is obscure to us in the Greek was probably made still more clear to those who heard His own spoken words by some gesture. As He said "this Rock", He may have touched His own breast or stretched out His hand towards Peter or pointed to yonder rock of Zion, invisible far away in the South, or to the cliff at Baneas or the height of Hermon beyond. We must do the best we can to interpret the original from its reflection in the Greek, illuminated only by light thrown forward from the Old Testament and thrown back from the history of the Church. But if Peter regarded Jesus as pre-eminently the Stone (Acts iv. 11; 1 Pet. i. 4 ff.), he can hardly have taken to himself the more honourable title of Rock. It seems reasonable to regard the Rock as the symbol of the Divine Substance and the Stone as a symbol of the Body of Christ, into which all "living stones" are builded.

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*Honiton,
Devon.*