

Chapter five: Simon becomes Cephas

In accordance with its likely origin and form as a Hebrew pesher, the story in Mark begins a recapitulation of Old Testament prophecies which Mark would have aimed to show (like the more original writer) had their fulfilment in more recent events.

So, it is stated that:

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah:

Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
a voice crying in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.'

The first part of the quotation is actually from Malachi, which foretells that the Lord of hosts will send a messenger to prepare his way – and that this will be signalled through the return of Elijah.

The second part comes from Isaiah, in the context linking the idea of the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness to the coming of the last days.

If we had an authentic ending of Mark, and if the gospel were to have continued with the pesher form, it should have culminated in a reconciliation of prophecy and passion narrative events, as these unfolded in the text. There will be some more on this, in chapter seven.

Following the prophetic preamble, the story continues with a description of the coming of John, the baptism of Jesus, John's acknowledgement of Jesus' precedence and then the recruitment of followers among fishermen in Galilee, first and foremost among which was Simon, along with his brother Andrew.

Simon's role grows in importance as the narrative progresses. He is the disciple with whom Jesus most often engages. He appears, in some sense, to be Jesus' second-in-command.

When early on, Jesus comes to name his appointed twelve apostles, the list includes first of all Simon 'to whom he gave the name Peter'. From that point onwards, Simon is referred to for the most part as 'Peter' and sometimes as 'Simon Peter'.

There is no explanation in the gospel of Mark, as we have it, as to why Simon should have been given the title or nickname. The name, as Petros in Greek, means stone or rock.

It should be noted that this name was not a usual or even an infrequent forename taken from a common pool in Greek or, in translation, from some other language. The first use that we know of, the source for Petros (Peter) as a name (however comfortable and familiar it might sound now, many centuries later) is Mark 3, 16. It is at this point a novelty, an oddity. It is stone.

Jesus would, of course, have been conversing with his companions in Aramaic, which was their own language. The Aramaic word for stone, and thus the presumed source for Petros, is כִּפָּא or כִּפָּא.

The letters are kaph, peh, aleph or, if the matres lectionis (vowel carrier) is used, kaph, yodh, peh, and aleph. Transliterated, as opposed to translated into Greek, this is read as Kephias.

There are, at several other points in Mark, transliterated quotes of Aramaic words and phrases, with translations at the same time given in Greek. Further on in the list, it is stated that Jesus gave to James and John the name 'Boanerges which is/means sons of thunder'. To

be consistent, what Mark should have said was, 'He [Jesus] gave the name [Kephass which is/means] Peter to Simon'.

But only the Greek word *Petros* (Peter) is given. It is possible that the Aramaic-derived word *Kephass* was subsequently edited out, though it is hard to see why. (But see chapter 11).

The name Peter is used frequently for the chief companion to Jesus in Mark and the other canonical gospels and then in Acts for the Nazarene leader who succeeded Jesus. Only John explicitly has Jesus linking the Aramaic and Greek equivalent words, in having Jesus say, 'You are to be called *Cephas* which is translated Peter'. In Matthew, there is an implied explanation for the choice of name, which is that Simon is being called Peter because he is to be the foundation for a new religion, 'I tell you, you are Peter (*Petros*, meaning stone) and, upon this rock (*Petra*), I will build my church'. Never mind, that there is no indication anywhere else that the Jewish Nazarene leader Jesus was intent on generating a Christian 'church'!

This is where we get to the point made earlier about an alternative narrative, imbedded in Christian tradition. The nickname 'stone' applied to Simon, though it was widely adopted in later gospels and Acts, originated in Mark. Further back in time, and also at the time in sources beyond Mark, it has no independent support.

Paul's use of the name *Cephas* (Κηφας) in his letters, for the Jewish persons or persons of some standing with whom he interacted, does not help the case that there was a Simon who had a nickname meaning 'stone' in Aramaic or Greek. It rather points to the way that the author of Mark may have made a huge mistake.

The crucial observation is that the transliteration *Cephas* (Κηφας) may have its origin equally in one of two ways, either as a known title or as a word meaning stone. This is because Greek did not distinguish the sounds represented by the slightly more guttural Aramaic *qoph* (ק) and the more precisely clipped *kaph* (כ). There was only one Greek letter kappa for both. Depending on which Aramaic letter the Greek letter originated from, *Kephas* (Κηφας) is either the High Priest's family title (קִיפָא) or a word meaning stone (כִּיפָא).

In reading Paul's letters, written in Greek, there is no immediate way of knowing for sure which of these *Kephas*, a transliteration from Aramaic, originally meant.

We do know that the author of Mark towards the end of the first century could and would have had access to copies of some of Paul's letters. We also know that he used similar, and sometimes identical, language to Paul and also refashioned some of Paul's material as sayings for Jesus. He could have decided that the person, with whom Paul interacted, was Jesus' chief follower Simon, and that therefore 'Cephas' was a nickname for him deriving from an Aramaic word כִּיפָא meaning 'stone'.

If such an association were ever directly made, it is no longer there in the manuscripts of Mark that are now available. There is only a Greek name, 'Petros'. From a very early time, Christian writers did however assume a derivation from the Aramaic for stone. So, for example, while the person accountable to James and at odds with Paul at Antioch, is described as *Cephas* in the majority of manuscripts of Galatians, an early version has 'Petros' at two points instead.

It may have been convenient to identify the two characters, Mark's Simon called Peter and Paul's *Cephas* as one but this was, on the evidence, mistaken. There are a number of reasons.

In the first place, the two persons are separated in time in their narratives.

The Simon, who accompanied Jesus in Mark, is paralleled by Simon who challenged King Herod Agrippa I in Acts (and also in *Antiquities*) and was driven into exile. This would have been around CE 43 or earlier, since Agrippa died the following year.

It is unlikely that the Simeon, who is depicted later in Acts as assisting James unhindered in Jerusalem, perhaps 10 or 15 years further on, was the same person as the earlier Simon. This later Simon/Simeon (both these being transliterations from the Hebrew, Shimon), parallels Cephas who was, along with others, in Antioch checking that Paul was keeping to the rules decided for Gentiles. Cephas is, like Simon/Simeon, described as a Jew and he was similarly accountable to James.

Secondly, as well as being separated in time, the two characters differed in their functions. The first Simon was evidently (according to Acts) a zealous Nazarene Jewish leader engaged in extending the influence of a Jewish ekklesia, holding in high regard its fallen leader, Jesus/Yeshua. The activities of the second character, whether in Acts or in Galatians, is described as being directed at Gentiles.

Acts does, of course, introduce confusion because its author, many think also the author of Luke, has assumed that Simon (called Peter) and Cephas were one and the same. Hence the attribution of the name Peter at one point in the text to Simeon and the conflicted description of the activities of the first Simon, both Temple-worshipping Jew and head of a fierce Jewish ekklesia meting out condign punishments for wrongdoers (witness the fate of Ananias and Sapphira) and also, apparently, an early Christian missionary!

A third point is that there is external evidence for an important priestly family with the title Kephaz (כִּיפָא), just the sort of people with whom Paul liked to engage. But there is no external evidence for someone with the nickname Kephaz (כִּיפָא) meaning stone. It is only in the gospels and Acts, that such a person appears, someone who already had a perfectly apposite nickname, 'bariona' meaning outlaw. This person, as Peter, originates in Mark.

A fourth point stems from the fact that Paul was writing his letters in Greek, while able also to speak and understand Aramaic. Unlike the author of Mark, he had no need to quote chunks of Aramaic to prove his credentials and does not otherwise do so. This is apart from one Aramaic phrase 'maran atha' (our Lord come) at the end of I Corinthians, which may have been a ritual incantation, rather as 'Amen' (Hebrew, in origin) is widely used today.

So, why did Paul not simply use a Greek translation for the Aramaic behind Kephaz? It is hard to understand, if Kephaz really did originate from Aramaic כִּיפָא meaning stone. There is available a good word Petros, used by other writers. Apart from the one ritual incantation mentioned, there is no other raw Aramaic used throughout the vast extent of Paul's letters in the New Testament.

In this context, the failure to provide the translation in Greek is hard to explain.

On the other hand, if Kephaz came from כִּיפָא, there is absolutely no problem. The High Priest's title is untranslatable. Or, it can be said that at the very least, no one has translated it. The reason is that there was and is no translation available! So, Paul would have had to stick with a transliteration, Kephaz (Κηφας), and that is exactly what did happen.

Fifthly and finally, it would be an extraordinary and unlikely coincidence if Mark's key character had a nickname that just so happened to arrive in transliterated form in Greek, exactly as the title of the High Priest Joseph Caiaphas? Well, yes, such coincidences can (though very rarely do) happen. But the reality is that such significant 'coincidences' in names in the Greek New Testament prove on examination to arise from mistakes (usually) and deliberate obfuscation (possibly) by its Greek-speaking author and editors. Thus,

Alphaeus, Iscariot and Cana, taken as Cananean, are not names which merely have coincidental associations but these are the products of scribal errors.

This applies just as much to Petros. It was never a real name, but the outcome of a false association, driven by the desire to make the gospel Simon a contemporary and associate of Paul in a reworked, Christianised, mid-first century Judean landscape.

Once the falsely made association is identified and accepted, the element of unlikely coincidence vanishes. There is no case that the Nazarene leader Simon, if historical, and Paul were colleagues. This Simon did not have the nickname 'stone'. He was not the same person as the character, or characters identified as Cephas in Paul's letters. Cephas was instead, in these instances, a title denoting a member of the High Priest Joseph's family.

Oddly enough, Mark could have been right in identifying a Simon Kephas, in a source to which he had access. It could have been a source unknown to us. But the association of names could more likely (and on the principle of Occam's razor) have occurred with one of the characters referred to as Cephas, in Paul's letters but subsequently removed in editing.

Simon was at the time a common name. It would be nothing out of the ordinary if a member of the family of the High Priest Joseph had this name, as well as the family title Caiphas/Cephas.

It is actually a nonsensical presumption that text, which shows clear signs of editing, has come down to us in an unaltered and original form. Paul's characters called Cephas would have had forenames, as well as the title, so as more precisely to identify them. But these names have been edited out, for reasons which will we come to consider later (see chapter 11).

It is likewise probably not accidental that the name of the High Priest was omitted in Mark. There is of course a respectable case that the author simply did not know it. There is equally an argument that he did and that either he himself, or a subsequent writer, chose to edit it out. Including it would only have drawn attention to Mark's mis-association.

The link-up of a Greek translated name, Petros, with its posited Aramaic original Kephas (as transliterated) should have been supplied, as Mark did in several other cases where he used Aramaic words. But the Aramaic original is no longer present in surviving manuscripts. So, for arguably much the same reason that the High Priest's name is not given, either the author or a subsequent editor chose to omit this.

It should be no surprise to discover that the New Testament stories that we now have are a product of a long process of alteration and editing. That is how the stories are and were made. What is in front of us is not largely an autograph, with just a few accidental or conscious changes, that can with perseverance be identified and discounted. It is the culmination and the embodiment of change.

The gospel of Matthew (really, the gospel arbitrarily attributed to 'Matthew') is a demonstration, if ever one were needed, of how much editing took place in even a small amount of time. It incorporates a lot of Mark. But there are huge additions, quite a few deletions and, even where there is text in common, may hundreds of examples of added nuance or reworking of Mark's text.

But Matthew is not a distinct gospel, from the hand of a new witness. It is Mark as a work in progress. Indeed, had the earlier version then been binned, as the Matthean author may have intended, it could simply have been our gospel of Mark.

Having the two versions still surviving does, however, provide an opportunity. Allowing for possible subsequent editing, we can see within Matthew evidence of what the scribe writing

this gospel saw, not in our copy of Mark available to us now, but in the copy that this individual had around the year CE 90, that is over nineteen hundred years ago.

Now, this offers up the possibility of some serious time travel! Let us have a go at retrieving a more original version of a fragment of text from an ancient papyrus manuscript of Mark, as seen through the eyes of the scribe engaged on writing Matthew.