



## Crock of Ages

*And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter,  
and upon this rock I will build my church,  
and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.*  
Matthew 16:18

† THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS IN Rome were faced with a lingering problem.

In the early years of Christianity, the Church of Rome was still a fractious backwater compared to older, larger, and more influential Christian enclaves to the east, like Alexandria, Ephesus, and Antioch.

Moreover, the entire evangelical story had played out on a stage far from the imperial center, while these flourishing Christian communities in and around the Holy Land could all claim direct ties to the Apostles.

Rome claimed to be the center of the civilized world, but to most early Christians, Rome was Babylon—the fount of false gods, Mammon, and mankind’s enslavement.

The Church could maintain that the early Christian congregation in Rome had been founded by the apostles Peter and Paul, but this claim to superiority completely lacked any scriptural or historical foundation.

Undeterred by these facts, the Church fathers in Rome devised an ingenious plan. The apostle Simon’s Latin name was Peter, or *petros*, which coincidentally, could also be translated as *rock*. It may well have been the most fateful pun in history.

By having Jesus call Peter the ‘rock’ on which he would build His church—and surreptitiously inserting the passage into the Gospel of St. Matthew—the church fathers in Rome pulled off a coup of epic proportions.

With Jesus having bequeathed the ‘keys to the kingdom of heaven’ to Peter—and Peter declared the first pope—the Church could claim that the papacy’s supremacy carried the ultimate authority of God Himself.

In reality, the lineage of the early popes was an *ex post facto* fabrication, expressly designed to bolster this claim. For the first century and a half of Christianity, there was no ‘Bishop of Rome,’ much less a ‘pope.’ In fact—as Protestants today are quick to point out—Jesus expressly forbade anything like a pope at the head of his earthly Church.

Anicetus (157-168 AD) was the first head of the Roman Church to even be identified as a bishop, and the doctrine of ‘apostolic succession’ was established not long afterward, when Irenaeus designated Linus as the handpicked successor of Peter to the title Bishop of Rome, preempting a raft of heretical theologians whose increasing influence threatened Rome’s aspirations.

By this time, however, a dozen popes had already succeeded Peter. (The magic number of twelve—corresponding to the number of apostles—may have been an improvisational afterthought, attained by adding a non-existent sixth Bishop of Rome, named, appropriately, Sixtus).

Exactly when the fateful interpolation in Matthew first appeared, or who was responsible for it, remains unknown. Stephen I—the first Bishop of Rome to assert primacy over the Church—began quoting the passage in 254, but the North African bishop, Tertullian, made reference to Peter’s ‘keys’ as early as 211, writing: “Remember that the Lord left to Peter and through him to the Church, the keys of it.”

Regardless of its origin, the reference was popularized by St. Jerome of Stridon, most notably in his translation of the Bible from Greek to Latin for Pope Damasus I in 382. (The pun on *Petros*, or Peter, and *petrus*, or stone, only works in Latin. In Greek, Peter was called *Simon* and rock is *cephas*—and in Jesus’s native Aramaic, rock is *kipha*.)

Jerome’s Latin translation would become the standard Bible for the next millennium.

By the time of Marcellinus (296-304), the Bishop of Rome felt secure enough in power to call himself ‘pope.’ (The archbishop of Alexandria had been using the title from 227, but Jerome’s sleight of hand gave Rome’s claim an all-important scriptural basis.)

Elevating Peter to the top of the apostolic pecking order and having him displace Paul (robbing Paul to pay Peter?) allowed the Roman Church to forge a previously non-existent chain of links directly from Jesus Himself to the Bishop of Rome, or pope.

This backdating of the papal lineage to Peter allowed Rome to claim superiority over all other Christian centers, both as the site of Peter’s quarter-century ministry and his reputed martyrdom under Emperor Nero.

In reality, not only is there no historical evidence that Peter was ever in Rome, there is scant evidence that the man even existed. (Even the Bible suggests Peter was never in Rome: in Paul’s epistle to the Romans, he greets twenty-nine of the brethren there by name, but somehow fails to mention Peter!)

Nonetheless, the ruse succeeded, and in spectacular fashion. The inserted Biblical passage was the theological bludgeon with which the Roman Church prevailed over its arguably more worthy Christian rivals, and Peter was gradually accepted as the founder of the Catholic (or *universal*) Church.

Over time, the Church of Rome would consolidate its power, forging a uniform Christian dogma and ruthlessly eliminating any other factions which dared challenge it.

Ironically, today’s Church glorifies its early popes as saints and martyrs, but Jerome himself described the actual church of the time as “a cesspool of vice”—its clergy selfish, greedy, and thoroughly corrupt. ■