

## Peter/Cephas Controversy

by Bryan Davis

Many assume that the apostle Paul confronted the apostle Peter in Antioch regarding Peter's apparent lack of straightforwardness with the gospel. It's no wonder they think so, because the King James Version of the Bible says exactly that in Galatians 2:11-14. Yet, there are many reasons to doubt this assumption.

Here is the passage in the King James Version:

Gal2:11 But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. Gal 2:12 For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. Gal 2:13 And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. Gal 2:14 But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before *them* all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?

Now here is the same passage from the New American Standard Bible:

Gal 2:11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. Gal 2:12 For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. Gal 2:13 The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. Gal 2:14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

We notice right away that the texts differ regarding the name of the person Paul confronted. Some Greek texts say that the man's name was Cephas, not Peter, and the translators of the NASB decided that these were the more reliable. To many people, that difference poses no problem, because Peter was given the name Cephas by Jesus, as follows.

"He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)." (John 1:42)

It's interesting that Jesus never called Peter by that name again. Besides the John chapter one reference, the apostle Paul is the only person in Scripture to refer to the name Cephas using the Greek word for that name. One possible place is in Galatians chapter one, and it's interesting to note that there is a difference in Greek texts here as well.

Here is the passage in the King James Version:

Gal 1:18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. Gal 1:19 But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.

And here it is in the New American Standard Bible

Gal 1:18 Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. Gal 1:19 But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

In this passage, it is clear that Paul was referring to Peter, because he indirectly refers to him as an apostle in verse 19. It seems to me that the KJV is correct in this case, and the name should be Peter.

Paul more definitely referred to Cephas using the Greek word for that name in other places:

1Co 15:3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 1Co 15:4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 1Co 15:5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Paul differentiates between Cephas and the twelve. This isn't proof that Cephas was not part of the twelve, because Jesus easily could have appeared to one of the twelve and then to the twelve together, but the following use of Cephas casts doubt on that idea.

1Co 9:5 Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?

Here Paul puts Cephas outside of the group called "the apostles." It is theoretically possible that Paul could have listed Peter separately from "the apostles," but it would be unnatural to do so. It is more natural to assume that Paul was referring to a non-apostle.

We have historical evidence pointing to the idea that Cephas was not the apostle Peter. Eusebius wrote:

"And there is a story from Clement in the fifth of his Hypotyposes in which he also says that Cephas, concerning whom Paul says: But, when Cephas came to Antioch, I resisted him to his face, was one of the seventy disciples, one who happened to have the same name as Peter the apostle." (Eusebius. The History of The Church. Book 1. 12)

This was Clement of Alexandria, who lived from about 150 AD to 215. He likely had access to records that no longer exist, so this is historical documentation indicating that this Cephas was not Peter. Cephas was one of the seventy disciples, though not one of the apostles.

Internal evidence in the Galatians chapter two passage also indicates that Cephas could not have been Peter. Let's look at the verses leading up to Paul's opposition to Cephas.

Gal 2:7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised Gal 2:8 (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), Gal 2:9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

If Cephas were the same person as Peter, why would Paul change his name in mid-sentence? (In this passage, there are no variations among the Greek texts. In other words, the various Greek texts all agree on the Greek words in these verses. They all use the Greek word for Peter at the same places, and they all use the Greek word for Cephas at the same places. Where it says “Peter,” the Greek word for Peter is used in every Greek text, and where it says “Cephas,” the Greek word for Cephas is used in every Greek text.)

Also, if Peter used the Greek word for “Peter” in his own letters to Gentiles, why would Paul use the Aramaic form (Cephas) to Gentiles? That wouldn’t make sense at all. If Paul had meant “Peter,” it would make sense to use the most recognizable form of the name when writing to Gentiles, and he certainly wouldn’t change from one to the other. The most reasonable conclusion is that Peter and Cephas are two different people.

According to this passage, Cephas recognized the grace given to Paul, because Paul had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised as Peter had been to the circumcised. Why, then, would this fact cause Cephas (if he were really Peter) to extend the right hand of fellowship to Paul and divide their ministries (Paul one direction and Cephas the other) when it was the division itself that indicated that they ought to divide? This would have to be circular logic.

To explain this crucial point further, let’s break down this passage:

Gal 2:7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised Gal 2:8 (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), Gal 2:9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, *James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.*

The reasons for the actions of James, Cephas, and John are underlined, and the actions themselves are italicized.

“Seeing that” indicates that James, Cephas, and John had noticed something that happened in the past. What did they notice? That Paul had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised and Peter to the circumcised. Those things happened at some unspecified time in the past, and these three are taking note of the events in order to decide on an action.

What is that action? To have fellowship with Paul so that he would go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

But that had already happened with the real Peter. He and Paul had already made the choice to divide the ministry and choose separate targets. So if Cephas is Peter, what is he using as a basis for deciding to divide the ministry and choose separate targets? The fact that he already has made that decision? That would be nonsense.

It would be like making a decision to become a farmer because you already are one. It is a senseless, circular statement.

The decision was based on something that happened in the past, so using that as a basis for an identical present decision that cannot logically be repeated by the same person proves that this Cephas cannot be Peter.

Again, Paul had already gone to the Gentiles, and Peter had already gone to the Jews, so if this Cephas is Peter, then he would be deciding something that had already occurred. This is not sensible. And since Paul changed the Greek words for the names in the very same sentence, thinking that these two people are the same would be the most illogical way to understand this passage. In fact, there is no logical reason at all to think that they are the same.

We also have proof from the book of Acts that this person in Galatians 2 could not have been the apostle Peter:

“From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the disciples.

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. (Acts 14:26 – 15:2)

This is a perfect description of what was described by Paul in Galatians 2: There was dissension with Judaizers regarding the necessity of circumcision, it occurred in Antioch, and Barnabas was involved as well. This Acts account perfectly fits the Galatians 2 account, and there is no other event recorded in Acts that coincides with Paul’s account of a dispute in Antioch.

So what did Paul and Barnabas do about the problem? They decided to consult the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Who was one of those apostles? Peter himself:

The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which

neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.” (Acts 15:6-11)

If Cephas in Galatians 2 was Peter, it would make no sense at all for Paul to go all the way to Jerusalem to consult the very person who was causing a problem. Peter was already in Jerusalem. He wasn't in Antioch. So it seems impossible that Peter could have been the man Paul confronted in Galatians chapter 2.

Some refer to other accounts in Acts where they believe the Galatians chapter 2 conflict might have taken place:

Act 11:22 The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Act 11:23 Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; Act 11:24 for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. Act 11:25 And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; Act 11:26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Act 11:27 Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. Act 11:28 One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. Act 11:29 And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. Act 11:30 And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

We see the presence of both Paul and Barnabas at Antioch along with the desire to provide for the poor, so this could be the first meeting between Paul and these people and when the right hand of fellowship took place. The Galatians text leads us to believe that the first meeting occurred in Jerusalem, so it might not have occurred here, but there is no mention of the dissension similar to what we saw in Acts 15.

If the first meeting did occur here, Peter could not have been present. Where was Peter at this time? In Jerusalem speaking up boldly for the Gentiles. (Acts 11:2 and following) According to the beginning of chapter 12, Peter went to jail in Jerusalem at that time (Acts 12:3), and Paul and Barnabas left Antioch (Acts 13:4). So if this Cephas is Peter, and this was the first meeting (which it might not have been), then he could not have been there at this time.

Others claim that the argument between Paul and Peter took place during another of Paul's visits to Antioch:

Act 18:22 When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch. Act 18:23 And having spent some time there, he left and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

There is no mention of any dispute here or of any visit by Peter, so why should we think that the Galatians 2 dispute took place at this time? There is no reason at all except for the fact that this is

the only time Peter could have been there, which carries the presumption that the person Paul confronted in Galatians 2 was Peter, and that is the idea in dispute.

Another problem is that Peter, at the time of Acts 18, would have to completely go against what he had so boldly stood for. It would be totally contradictory for Peter to do that. In fact, throughout the book of Acts, Peter stood up for the Gentiles' reception of the gospel. Ever since his call by God to preach to Cornelius in Acts chapter ten, Peter was unwavering in his support of unfettered access to the gospel for the Gentiles. There is no evidence in Acts that Peter ever strayed from this steadfast support.

Yet another problem with the idea that the Galatians 2 man was Peter is that Paul indicates that people who do what the confronted man did are not even true believers.

Gal 2:4 But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.

Paul questioned Cephas – “How is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” To compel someone to live like Jews is an attempt to bring people into bondage. Since Paul indicated that such people were false brethren, they weren't true believers, so it's reasonable to conclude that Cephas wasn't a true believer and certainly not the same person as the apostle Peter.

The evidence, both biblical and historical, is overwhelming that the man Paul confronted in Galatians is not the apostle Peter. That man was named Cephas, likely a Jew who sympathized with the Judaizers.

Because of Peter's faithful defense of the Gentiles and their reception of the true gospel at every turn, it is important to make sure we do not denigrate Peter's legacy with the false charge that he dissembled in Galatians chapter two. After the Holy Spirit indwelt him at Pentecost, he was sure and steadfast. Let us honor the truth about Peter and clear his name in the church, especially among those who have so greatly benefitted from his faithful stand for our inclusion in the faith.