



Naming the Messiah: The Onomastics of the New Testament

This week our focus is on onomastics, the study of names, and how names in scripture are used as carriers of identity, calling, and transformation. In the New Testament, names signal roles, relationships, and divine purposes. Just like we showed in the Old Testament, these names and new names given are motivational semantic layers, or callings guiding transformation.

At the center of our study this week is the transformation of Simon into Peter. This narrative read quickly is lost, but if studied slowly it is one of the most theologically important naming events in the text. It follows the path of Hesed as showing all throughout the Old Testament. Christ gives Simon the new name Peter long before he becomes what that name represents. The narrative then teaches us to watch Peter struggle, fail, return to his former identity, to be shown that the bitter oath of what Peter saw as failure was the calling all along. This pattern is a consistent biblical structure in which identity is called, tested, and understood through the bitterness of life.

We will examine key passages such as Gospel of John 1, Gospel of Matthew 16, and Gospel of John 21, pay attention to how names are used at critical moments. We will also compare this with earlier biblical examples like Abram becoming Abraham, Jacob becoming Israel, and Naomi to Marah and back, where the new name is a shift in covenant role and identity.

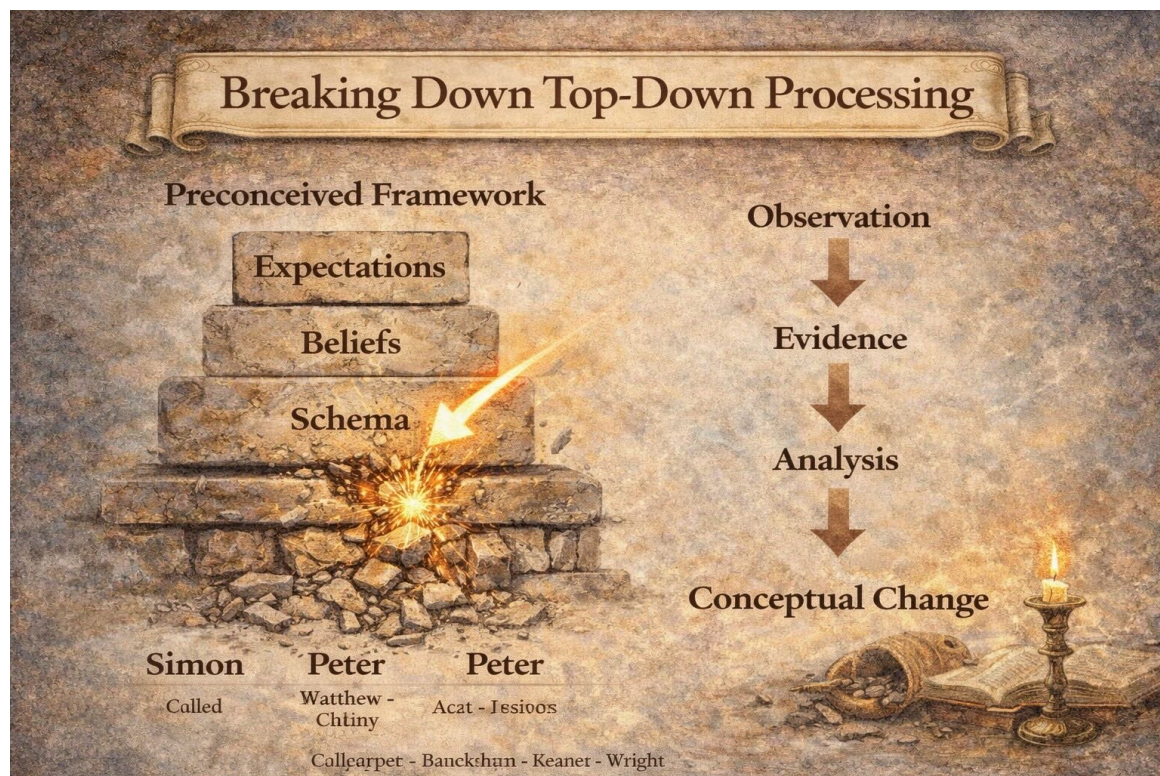
Alongside the linguistic work, we will see how texts are interpreted over time. The meaning of scripture is shaped by what is written and by how communities learn to read it. In cognitive psychology, these shared interpretive frameworks are called schemas. As early Christian communities wrestled with questions of leadership, authority, and unity, they read passages about Peter through those developing frameworks. Over time, those interpretations became stabilized and formalized, especially in the centuries following the New Testament period.

As you work through this material, you should see how scripture communicates meaning across time. Names, patterns, and narrative structures become guides that show the trajectory of identity as it develops within a covenant relationship. Hopefully you will be able to apply these teachings to your own life's trajectory.

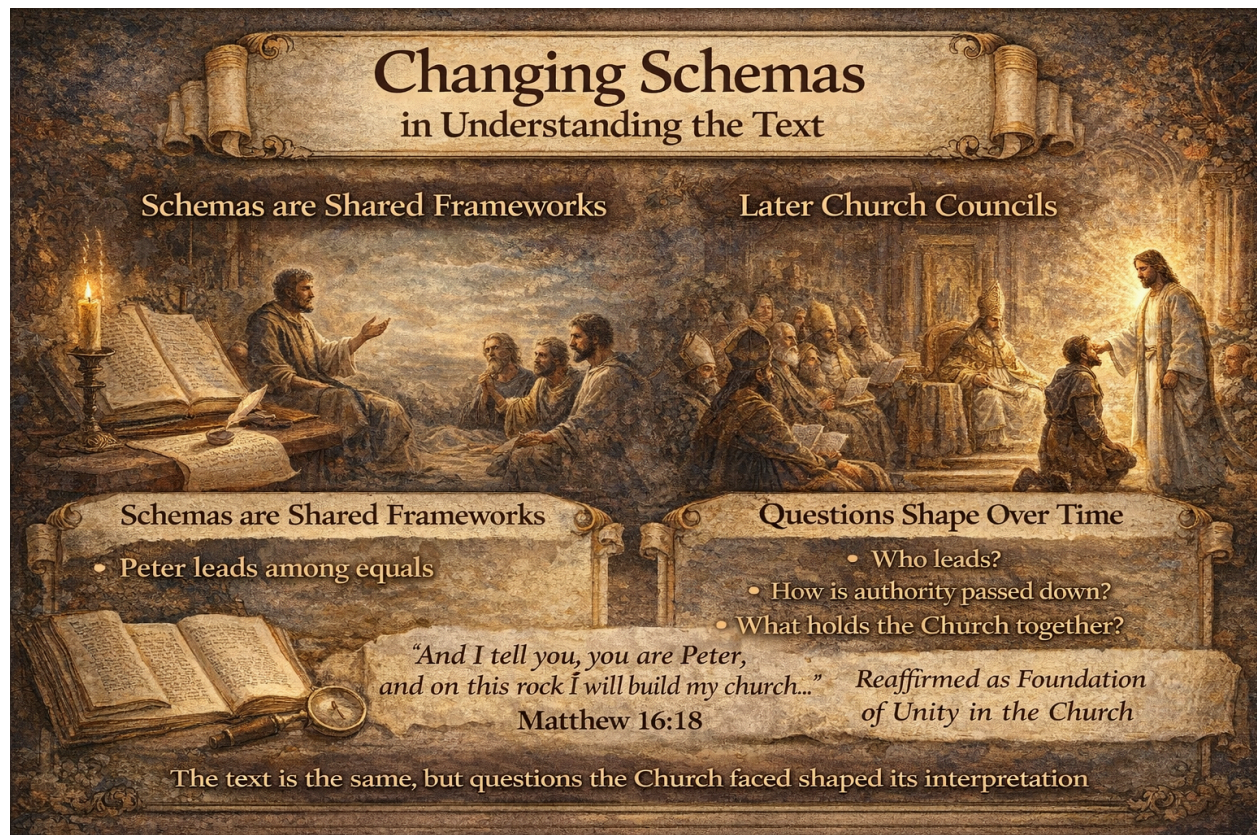
By the end of this study, you should be able to:

- Recognize how names function as markers of identity and calling
- Trace narrative patterns of identity, failure, and restoration
- Understand how interpretive frameworks shape the reading of scripture
- Hold together linguistic, historical, and theological perspectives in a coherent way

Approach the text slowly. Pay attention to repetition, to naming, and to shifts in language. The meaning is often carried in those details.



When we read scripture, we are not approaching the text from a neutral position. In cognitive psychology, this is called top down processing, where our prior beliefs, expectations, and shared frameworks shape how we interpret what we see. These frameworks, or schemas, guide understanding, but they can also limit what we notice. This means we often interpret a passage before we have fully observed its details. In this study, we aim to slow that process down by beginning with careful observation. By paying attention to language, repetition, and shifts in naming, we allow meaning to emerge from the text itself. This approach helps us recognize patterns, such as the development of Peter's identity, that might otherwise be overlooked when reading through preexisting assumptions.



Let's start with understanding how texts work over time.

The meaning of a text comes from what is written sure. But It also comes from how communities learn to read it. Their schema or lens

In cognitive psychology, we call these shared frameworks schemas.

A schema is a mental structure that tells a group how to interpret what they are seeing.

The early Christian community had to answer real questions.

Who leads?

How is authority passed down?

What holds the Church together?

Those questions shaped how they read passages like

Gospel of Matthew 16:18.

The text did not change.

The questions being asked of the text changed.

In the earliest period, Peter is leading among several. As the Church grows, Peter is recast as a symbol of unity. So structure develops, Peter becomes a model for authority. By the time of councils like the First Council of Nicaea, those patterns are being formalized into the system. So we need to parse out those changes in schemas. We are going to read the text at the level it was written, where new names carry identity, calling, and transformation. And at the same time, we are going to be aware of how later frameworks shaped the way that text has been understood. The text shows more than any single interpretation can contain. And if we are not careful, we will read the New Testament through frameworks that developed centuries after it was written.

Richard Bauckham

- <https://books.google.com/books?id=Jz3j4hHj7vYC>
- Free introduction and free sections on new names

NT Wright

- <https://books.google.com/books?id=F3VNAwAAQBAJ>
- Free early chapters on worldview

Francis Sullivan

- <https://archive.org/details/fromapostlestobi0000fran>
- Free book!!!! But just need the first three chapters on transition from apostles to popes

Schema Theory Overview

- <https://www.simplypsychology.org/what-is-a-schema.html>

1. Core Linguistic Framework: *Onomastics in the New Testament*

Onomastics, the study of **names and naming**, functions in the New Testament as a theological and narrative device. Names are not labels. They encode identity, role, authority, and transformation. In *Semitic* tradition, naming frequently signals divine commissioning

PRIMARY LINGUISTIC LAYERS

- ◆ Hebrew / Aramaic Substrate:
 - ◆ שמעון (Shim'on) → “to hear,” “to listen,” often tied to responsiveness to God
 - ◆ כִּפָּא (Kepha, Aramaic) → “rock,” “stone”
- ◆ Greek Rendering:
 - ◆ Πέτρος (Petros) – masculine form used as a proper name
 - ◆ πέτρα (petra) – “rock,” “bedrock,” conceptual foundation

KEY INSIGHT

The transition from Shim'on to Kepha / Petros is not translation alone. It is **reinterpretation**. The name is recast into a new linguistic world while preserving its theological force.

1. Core Linguistic Framework: Onomastics in the New Testament

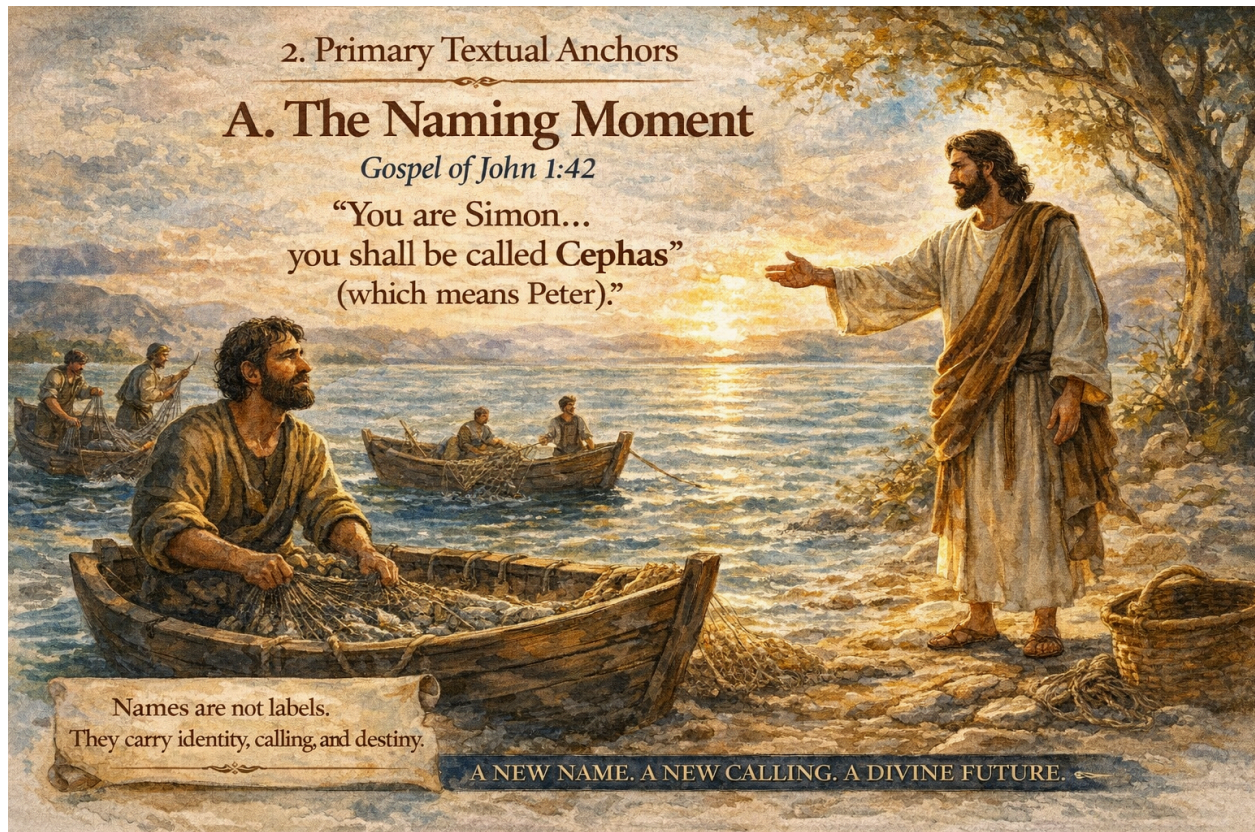
Onomastics is the study of names and naming or functions in the New Testament as a theological and narrative device. Names teach identity, calling, authority, and transformation. In Semitic tradition, naming will signal divine commissioning over straight forward identification.

Primary Linguistic Layers

- Hebrew / Aramaic Substrate:
 - Shim'on) → “to hear,” “to listen,” often tied to responsiveness to God) שמעון ○
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Key Insight

The transition from Shim'on to Kepha/Petros is foreordination. The name is then recast into a new linguistic frame while preserving its theological force.



2. Primary Textual Anchors

A. The Naming Moment

- Gospel of John 1:42
“You are Simon... you shall be called Cephas (which means Peter).”

This is a prospective naming. It defines identity before it is fully realized. This aligns with ancient Near Eastern naming patterns where names function as destiny statements.



B. The Commissioning Statement

- Gospel of Matthew 16:18
“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.”

Scholarly Note

- Debate centers on Petros vs *petra*.
- Some traditions argue distinction.
- Many scholars (including Craig S. Keener and N. T. Wright) emphasize continuity, especially when considering the underlying Aramaic (*Kepha*), where no distinction exists.

The linguistic evidence strongly supports that the naming and the “rock” are conceptually unified. Conceptually layered on purpose.

<https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/peter-the-rock>

The Failure and Reversion

- Gospel of Luke 22:31–34 (*prophecy of denial*)
- Gospel of John 18:15–27 (*denial narrative*)

After denial, the narrative subtly reverts:

- Peter returns to fishing (John 21:3)
- He is addressed again as “Simon, son of John”

Key Pattern

- Reversion to the original name signals a return to prior *identity*. This is a known biblical pattern.

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- ◆ Luke 22
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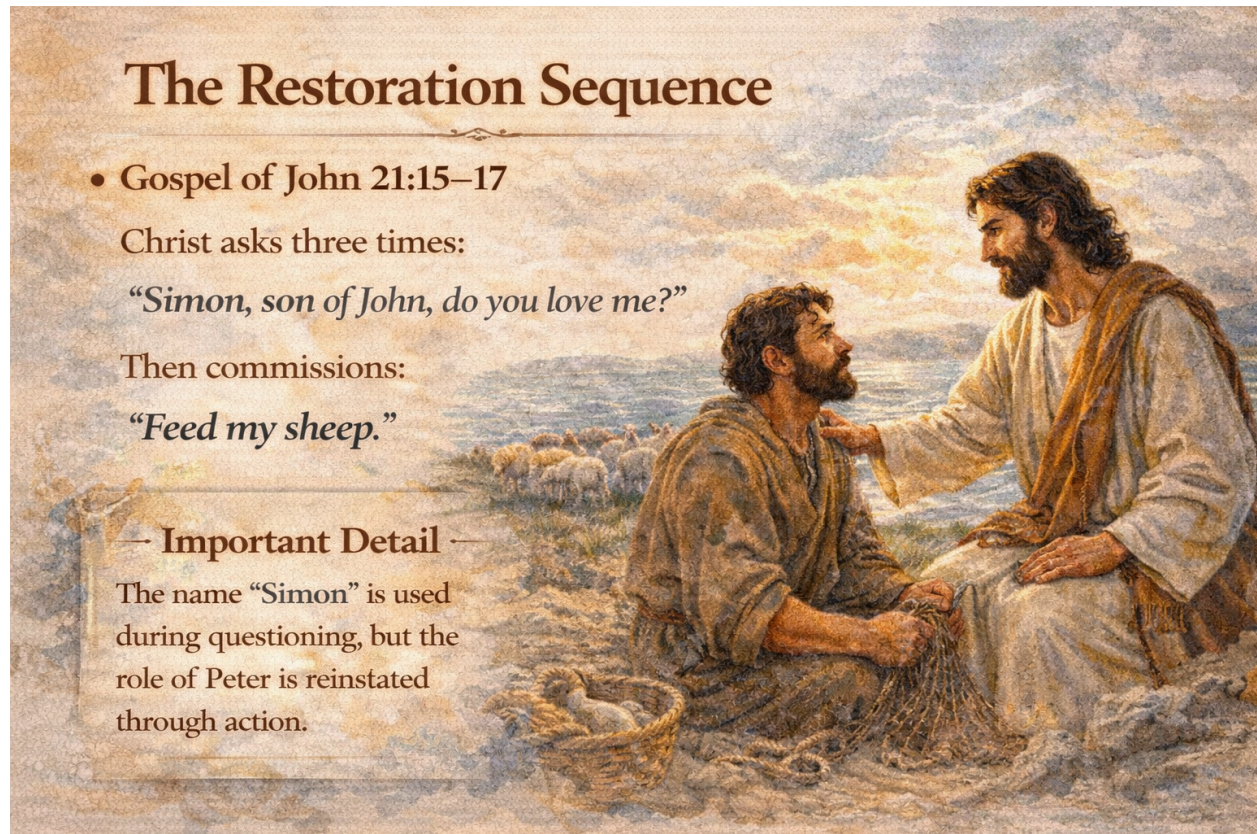
- Luke 22
- John 18
- John 21

Elder Holland

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2012/10/the-first-great-commandment>

Craig S. Keener

https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/john/keener_peter.pdf



D. The Restoration Sequence

- Gospel of John 21:15–17

Christ asks three times:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Then commissions:

“Feed my sheep.”

Important Detail

The name “Simon” is used during questioning, but the role of Peter is reinstated through action.

Narrative and Linguistic Pattern

This follows a consistent ancient pattern:

Stage	Name	Function
Calling	Simon → Peter	Identity given
Failure	Simon	Identity collapse
Restoration	Simon questioned → Peter enacted	Identity reaffirmed

This is structured storytelling using names as semantic markers.

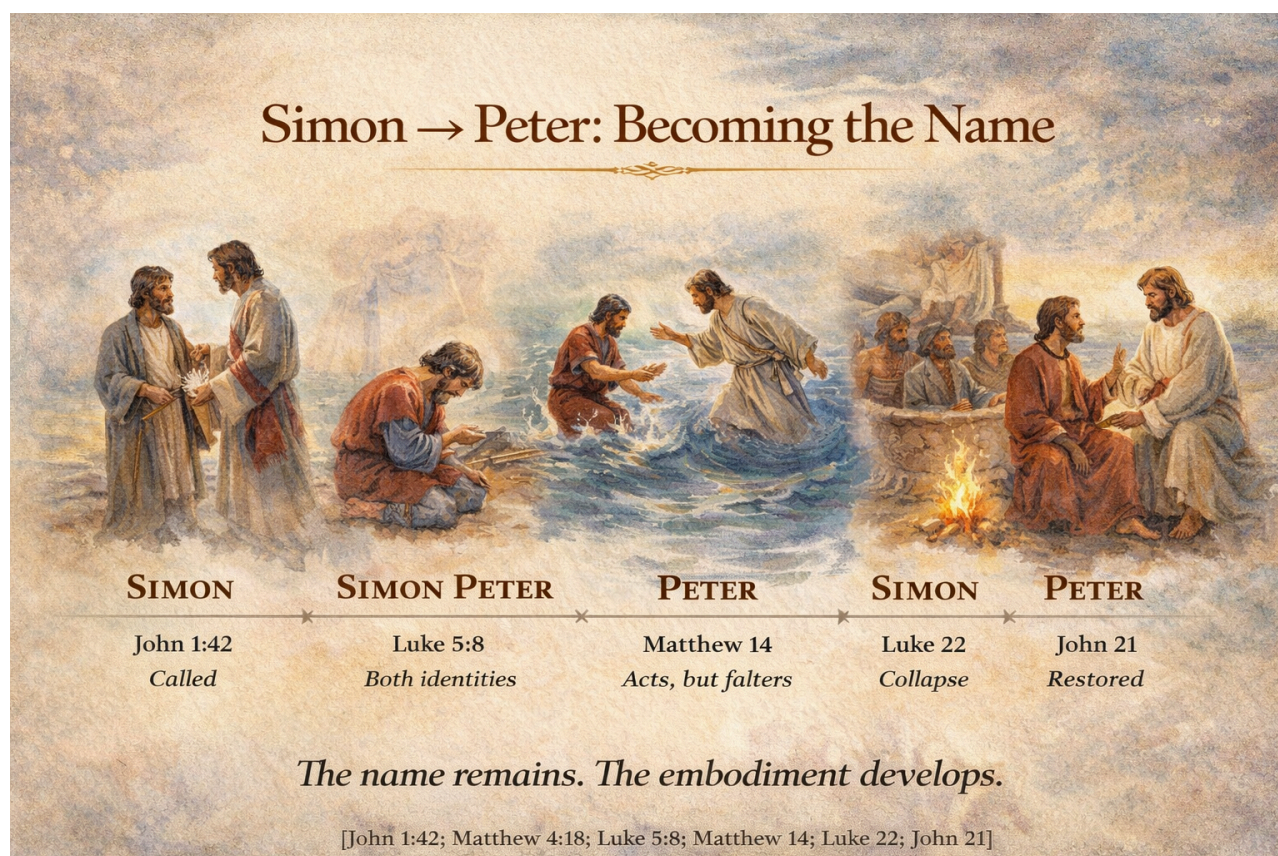


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Jack Welch

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol9/iss2/4/>

Jewish Encyclopedia

<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11304-names-personal?>

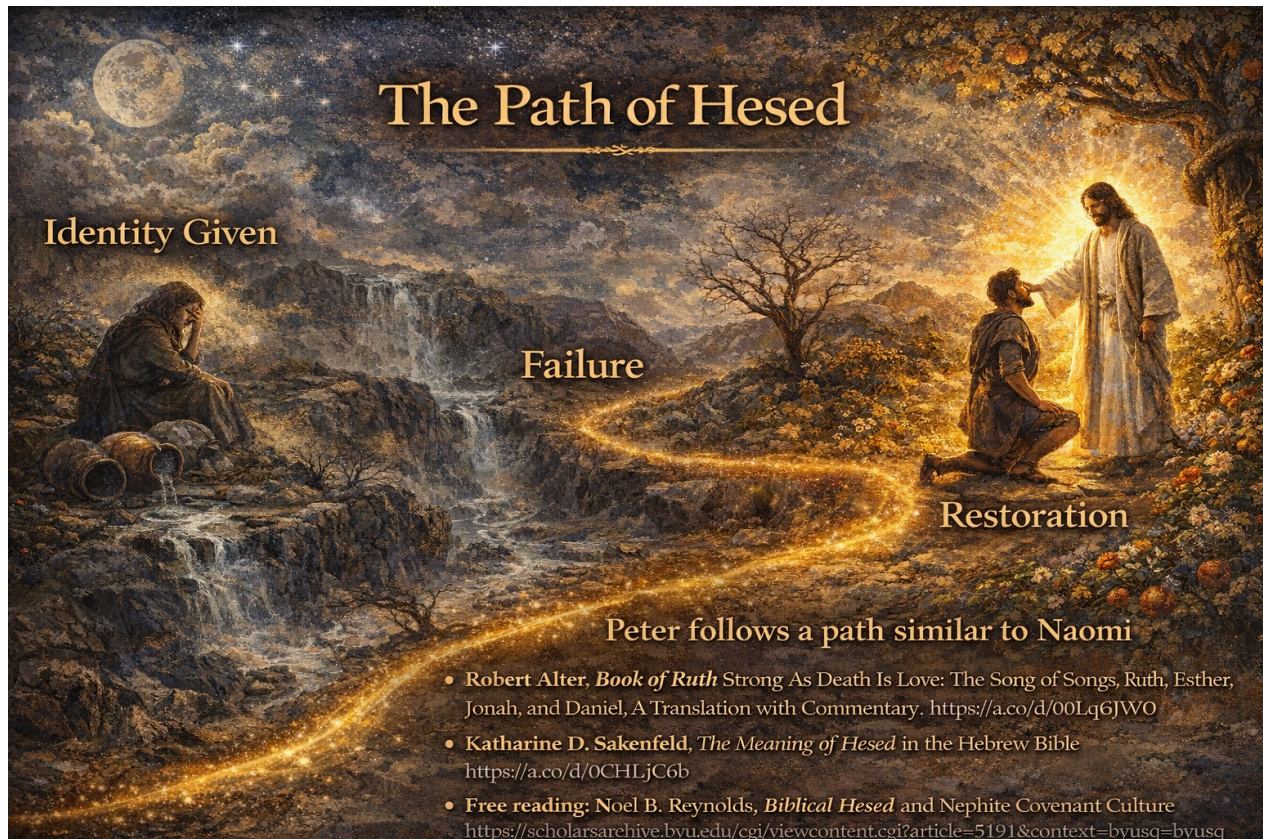
4. Comparative Biblical Onomastic Patterns

To establish this as a broader phenomenon:

- Book of Genesis 17
Abram → Abraham (covenantal expansion)
- Book of Genesis 32
Jacob → Israel (struggle → divine authority)
- Gospel of John 20:16
Mary recognized when called by name

Scholarly Insight

- Richard Bauckham notes that naming in early Christian texts preserves eyewitness identity and theological meaning simultaneously.
- Joel Marcus emphasizes naming as a form of narrative control and identity shaping.



5. Theological and Linguistic Synthesis

Peter is called into a role that precedes his ability to fulfill it.

The narrative shows:

- Identity is given before it is embodied
- Failure does not erase naming
- Christ re-invokes identity rather than replacing it

This aligns directly with examples of those given in scripture framed in the path of hesed. Having to first pass through the bitterness to know the sweet. The narrative arc of Naomi to Marah back to Naomi. All taught through motivational semantic layering of their names as a guide showing the trajectory of the path.

Robert Alter Book of Ruth

Strong As Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, A Translation with Commentary <https://a.co/d/00LqBJW0>

Katharine D. Sakenfeld's work on Hesed edited by Frank Moore Cross

The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry: A New Inquiry <https://a.co/d/0cHJc6b>

Free reading for a great dive into the path of Hesed

Noel B. Reynolds Biblical hesed and Nephite Covenant Culture

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5191&context=byusq>

6. Scholarly Disagreement

- Some Protestant traditions separate Petros and petra to avoid ecclesiological implications
- Catholic scholarship strongly affirms Petrine authority tied to the name
- Critical scholarship often focuses on Greek wordplay, sometimes minimizing Aramaic background

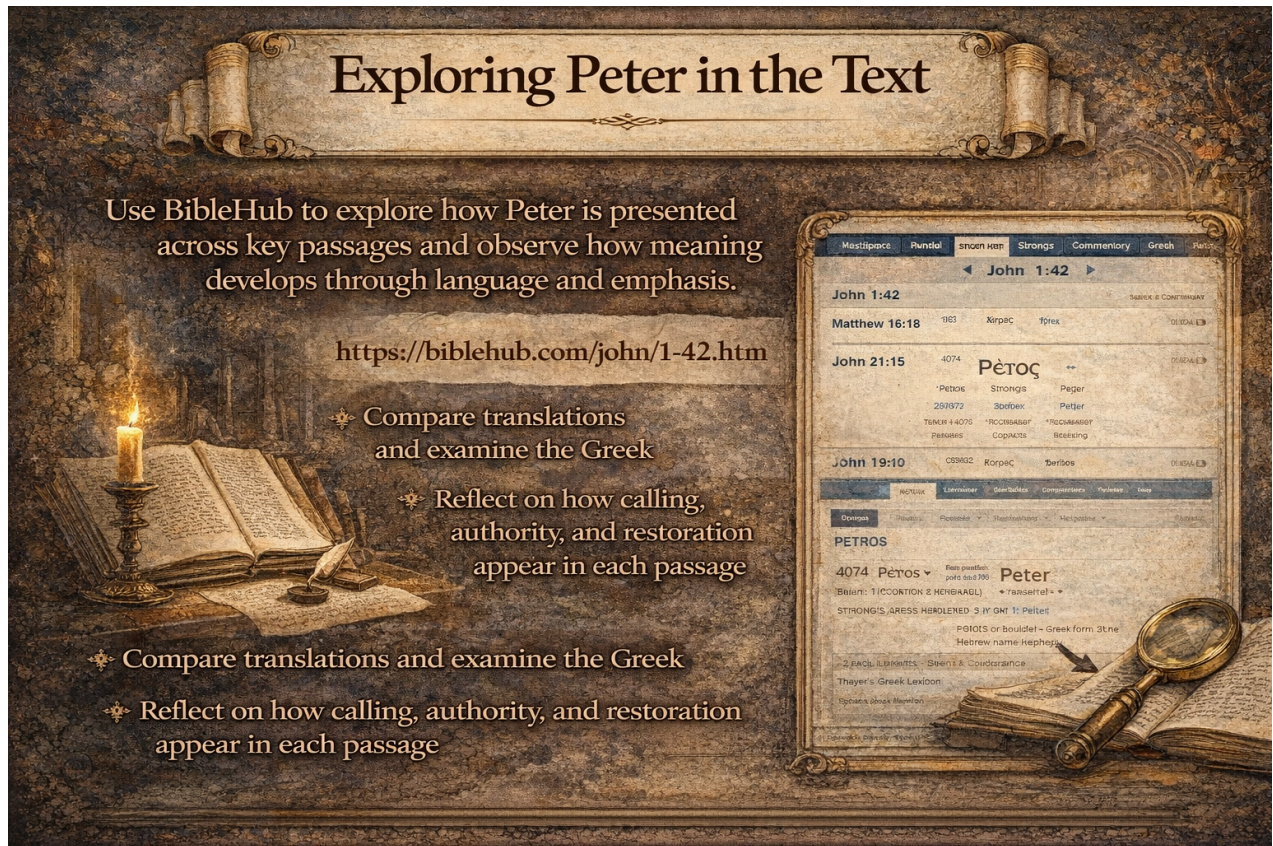
The Aramaic substrate resolves much of this tension.

The distinction collapses when read in its original linguistic environment.

7. Scholarly Sources

- N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God
- Craig S. Keener, The Gospel of Matthew Commentary
- Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses
- Ben Witherington III, works on socio-rhetorical criticism
- Margaret Barker, Temple Theology
 - https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/john/keener_peter.pdf

1. Activity



Exploring Peter in the Text

Use BibleHub to explore how Peter is presented across key passages and observe how meaning develops through language and emphasis.

<https://biblehub.com/john/1-42.htm>

- ✦ Compare translations and examine the Greek
- ✦ Reflect on how calling, authority, and restoration appear in each passage
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The screenshot on the right shows the BibleHub interface. It displays the Greek text for John 1:42, Matthew 16:18, and John 21:15. The word 'Petros' is highlighted in the Greek text. Below the text, there is a lexicon entry for 'Petros' with its definition and usage. A magnifying glass is shown over the lexicon entry.

Let's explore BibleHub to see how Peter is presented across these passages and try and take notes on how this new name's meaning develops through language and linguistic emphasis. Let's start with the Gospel of John 1:42, Gospel of Matthew 16:18, and Gospel of John 21:15 here is a link to start <https://biblehub.com/john/1-42.htm>. From there, navigate to each verse and use the "Parallel" feature to compare translations, noting which words remain consistent and which shift. Then open the "Interlinear" view to examine the Greek, paying close attention in Matthew 16:18 to the terms Petros and petra. Click into the lexicon entries to see how these words are defined and used elsewhere, and scroll down to compare how different commentators interpret the same passage.

As you move between these texts, focus on how Peter is portrayed in each setting. In one moment he is called, in another he is established, and in another he is restored after failure. Consider how the language and naming contribute to that progression. Reflect on what stays the same and what changes. This exercise is meant to help you see that while the text itself remains stable, the emphasis and interpretation can shift depending on context, language, and the questions being asked of the text.