



ETB: 1 Peter 2:1-10

# *Living* STONES

WHAT DID PETER MEAN?

## BY JIMMY DRAPER

**W**HEN WE THINK OF AN ANCIENT temple, the temple-palace of Karnak, located 300 miles up the Nile from Cairo, or the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens may come to mind. Perhaps we would envision Solomon's temple. Essential to each of these massive structures was the cornerstone. Such a stone was structurally significant. In Jesus' day people selected a cornerstone with care and laid it with great ceremony; the stone itself determined the lines of the architecture of the building. All the building took shape from the cornerstone. Today a cornerstone is merely decorative.

Simon Peter spoke of Jesus as the Cornerstone. This imagery was not unique. Following the leadership of the Holy Spirit, though, Peter explained how believers are joined with the Cornerstone in both identity and task.

### The Cornerstone

Seven hundred years before Christ, Isaiah saw the laying of the stone: "Look, I have laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation" (Isa. 28:16).<sup>1</sup> In his day people understood Isaiah was referring "to the massive stonework of the Temple, symbolizing the Lord's abiding presence among his people, a feature which was firm, unshakeable, [and] reliable."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' response to the chief priests and elders pointed to the reality of this Cornerstone: "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?'" (Matt. 21:42). Referring to the Israelites during their exodus, Paul spoke of that Stone: "All drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4).

Throughout, Scripture speaks of a mysterious, mighty, majestic, moving Stone. That Stone is Christ, and He is the Cornerstone of

the church. That was Peter's message; he called that Cornerstone the "living stone" (1 Pet. 2:4). The phrase appears to be an oxymoron, as if one were to say, "cool fire" or "bright darkness." We normally speak of someone as "stone dead." Yet the Bible calls the Lord both the Rock and the Life (Ps. 18:2; John 11:25).

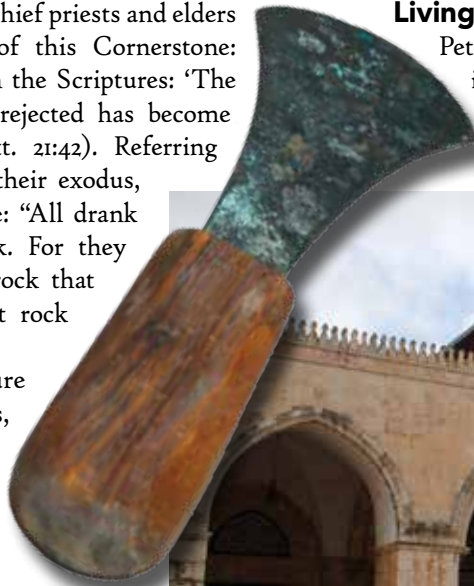
This says something about Christ that can be stated no other way. In Him, the living Stone, are vitality, life, energy, growth, and movement. Only the phrase "living stone" can accurately describe our great Cornerstone.

Peter explained, however, that the Cornerstone is a rejected Stone. In the phrase "rejected by men" (1 Pet. 2:4), the Greek term translated "rejected" means to be disallowed after having been inspected.<sup>3</sup> Although that Stone was in the eyes of God "choice and precious"—meaning "well-hewn and valuable for building"<sup>4</sup>—people generally rejected and set aside that Stone.

The psalmist foresaw this: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Ps. 118:22). This was Jesus' prediction of Himself: "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected" (Luke 9:22). This was Peter's passionate proclamation of Him, "This Jesus is 'the stone rejected by you builders, which has become the cornerstone'" (Acts 4:11). But God's perspective is that Jesus is God's chosen and precious Cornerstone. From Him the spiritual temple takes its shape.

### Living Stones

Peter enlarged the scene. He described Christ building a temple using believers as living stones, "you yourselves, as living stones, are being built into a spiritual house" (1 Pet. 2:5). That great



**Upper right:** Dated to about 1321 B.C., a chisel that was used for stone working.

**Right:** Atop the Temple Mount in

Jerusalem, this structure stands in the general location of the Royal Stoa where Peter defended Christ before the Sanhedrin.



Cornerstone is a magnetic stone. Mysteriously, stones are drawn from all around that Cornerstone and into it. Dead, lifeless stones come into contact and are made alive. “Nowhere else in the New Testament are believers called living stones.”<sup>5</sup> In Ephesians 2, the apostle Paul declared, “you were dead in trespasses and sins....BUT GOD, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us, made us alive with the Messiah” (Eph. 2:1,4-5a emphasis added).

Peter gave the most magnificent picture in Scripture of the church’s dignity and destiny. He described God building a spiritual temple with believers as the living stones of that edifice.

To the Athenians Paul preached, “God who made the world and everything in it ... does not live in shrines made by hands” (Acts 17:24). When Paul said that, he was standing in the shadow of the Acropolis at Athens. Years later Paul explained that believers are God’s “temple.”

### Believers as Temples

Every believer, although a part of the whole, is a microcosm of the whole. Paul asked, “Don’t you know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit?” (1 Cor. 6:19a). That the Holy Spirit should condescend to indwell humankind is an utter amazement, but this is reality. Every believer is a temple, but every believer-temple becomes a brick in that temple that God is building. Every follower of Christ is a temple—and at the same time is a living stone in the vast, invisible temple of the ages.

As if looking through a kaleidoscope, Peter again described a changing image. The walls of the living

temple dissolve and onlookers see inside its sanctuary. Those who a moment ago were living stones become sacred, holy priests serving in the temple. “You yourselves, as living stones, are being built into a spiritual house for a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5).

### Believers as Priests

Old Testament priests served for limited times in only one place. Peter envisioned a church in which all followers of Christ, at all times and in all places, serve as priests. A believer is a priest everywhere and always—at home, at work, at church, in the community, alone, or with others. According to Peter’s words, every believer holds a sacred office, a believer-priest within the temple of living stones.

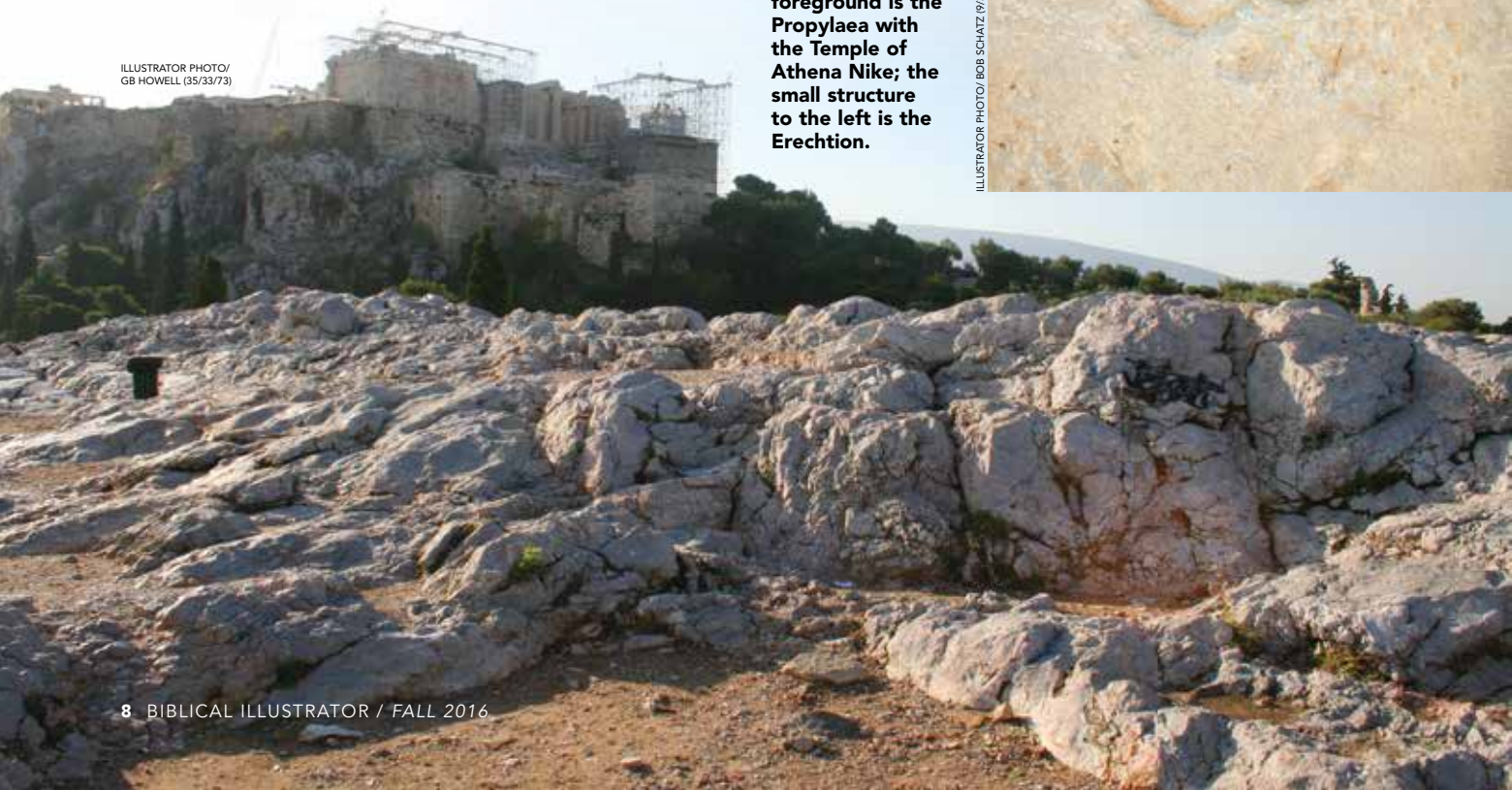
What does a believer-priest do? The Latin word for “priest” is *pontifex*, which comes from two words, one meaning “bridge” and another meaning “to make.”<sup>6</sup> The priest is one who makes or builds a bridge between God and man. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only one great

**Right: A mason’s mark on a column from Ashkelon. Historians believe the marks help identify the work of a particular mason.**

**Below: View of the Acropolis as seen from Mars Hill in Athens. Shown in the foreground is the Propylaea with the Temple of Athena Nike; the small structure to the left is the Erechtion.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (9/34/16)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/  
GB HOWELL (35/33/73)

**Right: One of three massive construction stones that were part of the foundation for the Temple of Jupiter in Baalbek, Lebanon. The block, which weighs over 800 tons, measures about 65 feet long and is over 17 feet wide at the top end. Comparing the stone's height to the gentleman standing at the raised end highlights the stone's massive size.**

**Lower right: Dated to about 1321 B.C., a saw used to cut both limestone and wood.**

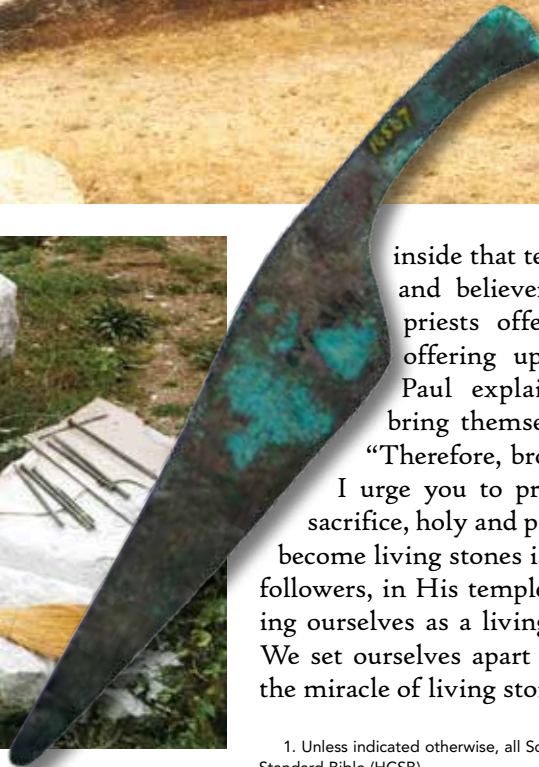
**Below: Stone mason working at Philippi.**




ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (2/7/11)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/MURRAY SEVERANCE (7/4/13)



inside that temple as both the living stones and believer-priests. But what are these priests offering? Each believer-priest is offering up “spiritual sacrifices” (v. 5). Paul explained that Christians are to bring themselves as the spiritual sacrifice: “Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Rom. 12:1). To become living stones is not enough. God sets us, His followers, in His temple as “a holy priesthood” offering ourselves as a living sacrifice to Him (1 Pet. 2:5). We set ourselves apart for His exclusive use. This is the miracle of living stones! 

Priest, yet He has left believers as His under-priests, bridge builders for Him on earth.

Christians speak of the “priesthood of the believer.” The great truth of this doctrine is that Christ’s followers are to serve God as a way of life. Believers are in His living temple and part of His plan for the ages. This concept dignifies every aspect of each believer’s life. No job is so menial or vocation so prestigious that this high calling does not dignify it. Believers are part of what God is doing.

Simon Peter again refined his description as this scene dissolved into another. He had described believers

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
2. J. B. Taylor, “Cornerstone” in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1980), 319.
3. To “reject” (after scrutiny), ‘declare useless’, to regard as unworthy/unfit and therefore to be rejected”; ἀποδοκιμάζω (apodokimazo, reject) in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 110.
4. J. Ramsey Michaels, 1 Peter, vol. 49 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1988), 99.
5. Thomas R. Schreiner, 1,2 Peter, Jude, vol. 37 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, B&H, 2003), 105.
6. “Pontifex” in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2005), 964.

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