

Victory
Matthew 16:18-19
Pierre Cannings

I. The Rock

- a. Name - Peter' to Simon not as an affectionate nickname nor even in the first instance as an alternative name, but rather as a means of marking destiny in some manner
 - i. Originally πέτρα was used of a solid mass of rock and πέτρος of a (free-standing) rock/stone,
 - ii. 'You are Peter, and on this rock/stone [which you are] I will build my church'. At the same time the two words can hardly be understood as marking a clear contrast (e.g., 'you are Peter = [little stone], but it is on this [much greater solid] rock that I will build my church').
 - iii. Elsewhere in the NT the individual Christian is always *lithos* rather than *pétra* (cf. 1 Pet. 2:5). Strictly only Christ himself is *pétra*. Peter is *pétra* only as he is enclosed within the revelation in Christ
 1. concerning the construction of his Church "on this rock" (= the noble rock "Peter") has been set by Matthew into the portrayal of Peter's messianic confession.
- b. Role -Jesus refers to Peter as the stone foundation of the edifice of the eschatological people of salvation (composed of Jews and Gentiles), as the decisive mediator of the revelation tradition.
 - i. The natural reading of the passage, despite the necessary shift from *Petros* to *petra* required by the word play in the Greek (but not the Aramaic, where the same word *kêpā* occurs in both places), is that it is Peter who is the rock upon which the church is to be built. As has often been pointed out, it is none other than the confessing Peter who is in view here as the rock, and it is as the representative of Christ that the authority to be mentioned in the next verse is given to him in his custody of the gospel of Christ
- c. The rock imagery implies both stability and endurance (cf. 7:24–25), even before the gates of Hades (see below). For Jewish background concerning a community built upon a "rock,". "Rock" of course refers here not to Peter's character, as will become clear later in the narrative, but to his office and function (see too France) as leader of the apostles
 - i. In the OT rock (Heb. *sela* ' ; *šûr*) symbolizes the security and defence of a steep and inaccessible refuge (cf. Is. 32:2; 33:16). Similarly, it is used of an immovable foundation (cf. Ps. 40:2): to remove 'the rock' is equivalent to shaking the world (cf. Jb. 18:4).

II. My Church

a. I will Build

- i. Build - **to construct in a transcendent sense *build***: of the building up of the Christian congregation/church
- ii. The use of ‘I will build’ confirms the foundation imagery intended in ‘on this rock’ and indicates that ‘my church’ is being viewed under the image of a building. The combination of ‘rock’ and ‘I will build’ makes a connection with 7:24 likely: the recognition of the significance of Jesus which fits Peter to play a foundational role points back to the yet deeper foundational role of the instruction offered by Jesus (cf. 28:19). The use of ‘I will build’ also reserves for Jesus the position of prime mover in what is to happen on the basis of the role to which Peter is called
 1. Acts 2 God is adding to the church.

b. My Church

- i. Church - **the global community of Christians, (*universal*) church** the totality of congregations of Christians
 1. A group or assembly of persons called together for a particular purpose. The term appears only twice in the Gospels (Mt 16:18; 18:17)
- ii. There is no difficulty at all in supposing that Christ used some Aramaic phrase or word which would signify the community or society of His disciples, knit together by their belief in His divine Sonship, and pledged to the work of propagating His teaching.
- iii. As argued above, underlying the Greek word ἐκκλησία, “church,” is an Aramaic word spoken by Jesus meaning “community” (ܠܩܗܐ; [*qāhāl*]; ܡܕܢܬܐ, [*ēdā*] = συναγωγή, “synagogue,” in or possibly ܡܕܢܬܐ [*kēnīštā*]). The word ἐκκλησία appears often in the usually as the translation of ܠܩܗܐ (*qāhāl*). Israel can be called ܩܗܠ ܕܝܗܘܐ (*qēhāl YHWH*), ἐκκλησία τοῦ κυρίου, “community of the LORD.” The word for community in Jesus’ day was ܡܕܢܬܐ (*ēdā*), usually translated συναγωγή. If Jesus is the Christ, then it is natural to expect that the community Jesus refers to is the messianic community or the eschatological people of God. Jesus says “my community,” where the μου, “my,” is emphatic by its position. It is the messianic community of the Messiah, and the statement is thus an implicit messianic claim (Carson; cf. Brown, 33). Naturally Matthew and his readers understood by ἐκκλησία the church, and they did so justifiably. (The word ἐκκλησία occurs only here and in 18:17 in the four Gospels.) The point of the assertion is that Jesus, i.e., the risen Jesus, will build his new community in the first instance through the labor of the apostles (cf. Eph 2:20), and Peter has been designated as the leader of the apostles (cf. the early chapters of the book of Acts). The metaphorical use of “build” (οἰκοδομήσω) is appropriate to a community conceived of as a

spiritual “house” or “temple” (cf. “house of Israel” and note the description of the church as “God’s building” in 1 Cor 3:9; cf. Eph 2:19–21).

- iv. The specifically Christian usages of this concept vary considerably in the NT (1) In analogy to the OT, it sometimes refers to a church meeting, as when Paul says to the Christians in Corinth: “... when you assemble as a [in] church” (1 Cor 11:18). This means that Christians are the people of God especially when they are gathered for worship. (2) In texts such as Matthew 18:17; Acts 5:11; 1 Corinthians 4:17; and Philippians 4:15, “church” refers to the entire group of Christians living in one place. Often the local character of a Christian congregation is emphasized, as in the phrases, “the church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1), “in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2), “in Thessalonica” (1 Thes 1:1). (3) In other texts, house assemblies of Christians are called churches, such as those who met in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19). (4) Throughout the NT, “the church” designates the universal church, to which all believers belong (see Acts 9:31; 1 Cor 6:4; Eph 1:22; Col 1:18). Jesus’ first word about the founding of the Christian movement in Matthew 16:18 has this larger meaning: “I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” The church, both as a universal reality and in its local, concrete expression, is more specifically designated in Paul’s writings as “the church of God” (1 Cor 1:2; 10:32) or “the church of Christ” (Rom 16:16).
- v. The ἐκκλησία, on the other hand, was the society of Christ’s disciples, who were to announce the coming of the kingdom, who were to wait for it, and who would enter into it when it came. The Church was built upon the truth of the divine Sonship. It was to proclaim the coming kingdom. In that kingdom Peter should hold the keys which conferred authority

c. Hades will Not overpower

- i. Gates- of gates of cities, as to the location of the Gate Between the Two Walls
 - 1. the opening of the gates or even proximity to the gates may be an unwelcome indication that death is threatening; the closing of the gates may suggest the irreversibility, for the most part, of the claim of death
- ii. Hades-
 - 1. It is essentially synonymous with “gates of death” (as in Job 38:17; Pss 9:13; 107:18; Hades/Sheol being understood to be the realm of the dead.
 - a. The metaphor “gates of Hades” is found in the OT and intertestamental writings (where in Hebrew it is the “gates of Sheol” [שַׁעַרֵּי שְׁאוֹל, *ša’ārê šě’ól*]) in Isa 38:10;

- b. The old Hebrew concept of the place of the dead, most often called Sheol (*šē'ôl*) in the Hebrew Bible, corresponded quite closely to the Greek Hades. Both were versions of the common ancient view of the underworld. Like the old Greek Hades, Sheol in the Hebrew Bible is the common fate of all the dead, a place of darkness and gloom, where the shades lead an unenviable, fading existence
- c. Whatever the precise meaning of Matt 16:18, its reference must be not to the powers of evil, but to the power of Hades to hold the dead in death. A related image is that of the keys of Hades (Rev 1:18), which open its gates the risen Christ, victorious over death, has acquired the divine power to release from the realm of death

iii. Not Overpower

- 1. Overpower- **to have the capability to defeat, win a victory over**
 - a. Overcome- Possible fits for Mt. 16:18 are 'be stronger than', 'make themselves strong against', 'gain power over', 'prevail over'
- 2. Later *πύλαι ᾗδου* figured especially in statements about the descent into Hades. The fact that Christ has power over the gates of Hades is emphasised already in Rev. 1:18, which says of the exalted Christ
- 3. Given the usual understanding of the phrase, it is probably best taken as meaning "the power of death" or perhaps simply "death"; it is this that shall not overpower (*κατισχύσουσιν*) the church. (That is, the church as God's eschatological community will never die or come to end—this despite the eventual martyrdom of the apostles and even, more imminently, the death of its founder

It seems best to understand that what Jesus announces in v. 18 will be achieved here through giving the keys to Peter: this is how he will function as a rock, and it will be through his possession of the keys that the church will be put in a position of being able to rescue people from the grip of Hades. The kingdom of heaven is being imaged as a city which is entered through a city gate, the key to which is to be placed in the possession of Peter.

III. The Keys

- a. Keys – Key - The more usual biblical sense of the word is a symbol of power and authority
 - i. Heaven- in heaven," is simply an emphatic way of stating that the action referred to would be permanent in its results

b. To Bind and Loose

- i. In its primary meaning, the phrase “binding and loosing” refers to the allowing and disallowing of certain conduct, based on an interpretation of the commandments of the Torah, and thus it concerns the issue of whether or not one is in proper relationship to the will of God (contrast the reference to the Pharisees’ misuse of their authority [note implied keys!] in 23:13). In Matthew, Jesus is the true interpreter of Torah. His disciples will pass on that interpretation and extend it. Thus Matthew may have in mind the teaching office of Peter and the apostles (for whom the power of binding and loosing is also assumed in the plural verbs of 18:18 in the discourse on “church discipline”).
- ii. The suggestion that has been made is that in Jewish tradition Is. 22:22 had already been used in relation to the authority of Jewish teachers, and that applied in this way, a move to binding and loosing imagery is natural enough (cf. the use of binding and loosing imagery for rabbinic judgments on what is permitted and forbidden behavior in 4a, discussed above). The Jewish materials involved are hard to interpret with any confidence. It would, however, fit with declarations as to permitted or forbidden behavior or with imposition and lifting of a ban of exclusion from the community of faith.
- iii. The Evangelist may very possibly have had in mind the part taken by S. Peter in the early days of the Church in admitting Gentiles to its privileges, just as in the “binding” and “loosing” he may have had in mind the prominent part taken by S. Peter in regulating the affairs of the infant Church.
- iv. It is possible that originally the “keys” described the effect of S. Peter’s insight into divine truth. His perception that Jesus was the Divine Son, was a key which admitted him into the kingdom. By bringing others to the same faith, he would open for them, too, the kingdom, in contrast to the scribes and Pharisees, who locked it in the face of those who wished to enter