

The Apostle Peter's Place in the Ecclesiology of the Gospel of Matthew: *An Inquiry into the Theological Meaning of "the Rock" and "the Keys of the Kingdom" in Matthew 16:18-19*

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Introduction

Christians often think of the Bible as the book of answers: answers for any theological, ethical, psychological, or some other question. But there are some passages in the Bible which evoke many more questions than they give answers. Therefore even today, after hundreds (or thousands) of years of interpretation, a contemporary biblical scholar can easily find himself in the very center of a discussion over this or that issue. Matthew 16:18-19 belongs to this sort of passage: although the most aggressive and polemic 'battle of interpretations' is over,^[1] there are still some unresolved problems and hence the room for further investigation.

As M. Jack Suggs colourfully notes, "Coming to Matthew 16:13-20 is a bit like visiting a Civil War historical site. It is an old exegetical battleground over which Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians have raged in conflict..."^[2] Yet, whether this theological "Civil War" is over or not, the analysis of the current state of affairs and the clarification of the results are necessary, especially in light of the continuing ecumenical movement and emerging New Testament theologies of the twenty-first century. How should contemporary Christians interpret such strange (for



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^[1] U. Luz names three basic components of the "critical consensus" concerning some problematic points of the text and its traditional interpretation: it is stated that Matt. 16:17-20 does not speak of (1) Peter's primacy directly received from Christ, (2) a purely juridical sort of primacy, and (3) apostolic succession. In Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 165-166.

^[2] M. Jack Suggs, "Matthew 16:13-20," *Interpretation* 39, no. 3 (July 1985): 291.

people of today) words and symbols as ‘the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven’, ‘the gates of Hades’, or ‘the rock’ of the Apostle Peter? What did Jesus mean? What did Matthew mean? And, finally, what may these things mean for us now?

Thus, the goal of this brief biblical and theological research is to define the most likely meaning of Matthew 16:18-19, i.e. to clarify, if possible, the true sense of the images of the rock and the keys as they relate to Jesus’ commission to Peter and draw a conclusion about Peter’s role (including his responsibility and authority) in Matthean ecclesiology. The emphasis of the investigation is on the *meaning* of the pericope under analysis in the context of the gospel of Matthew and—as far as necessary—the New Testament, and not on its *reception history* or possible *applications*.^[3] Yet this meaning is somewhat obscure and demands a careful approach to the text.

1. Exposition of the Text and its Immediate Context

Prior to the theological analysis of the text and its parts, an exegetical exposition of Matt. 16:18-19 and an overview of the surrounding literary context are needed. Therefore I will provide their Greek text and English translation and then comment on the structure of chapter 16 as the immediate context of the aforementioned verses and draw some conclusions on their role in the bigger picture of Matthean intentions.

1.1. Text and translation

The text and translation will be presented in the table format (see Table 1.1) for an easier appropriation by the reader. Verses 18-19 read and translate as follows:

<i>Greek text (NA²⁷)</i> ^[4]	<i>English translation (NRSV)</i> ^[5]
18 καὶ ἐγὼ δέ σοι λέγω ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ πύλαι ᾄδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς.	18 “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.
19 δώσω σοι τὰς κλεῖδας τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν, καὶ ὃ ἂν δήσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, καὶ ὃ ἂν λύσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.	19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Table 1.1

^[3] U. Luz provides a useful overview of the reception history in his *Studies in Matthew*, pp. 165-182.

^[4] Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsch Bibelgesellschaft, 1997) and Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

^[5] *New Revised Standard Version Bible (NRSV)*, (Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989).

^[6] D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, *The World Biblical Commentary* 33b, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1995), 453ff, 456ff, 462ff, 481ff.

1.2. The immediate literary context: An overview of the structure of Matthew 16

Matt. 16:18-19 belongs to the larger unit of chapter 16. Generally, the structure of this literary unit can be sketched as follows (following D. A. Hagner's model,^[6] see Table 1.2):

<i>Part</i>	<i>Verses</i>	<i>Content</i>
1	15:39-16:4	The Pharisees and Sadducees demand "a sign from heaven" to receive evidence that Jesus either is a real or false Messiah, but Jesus refuses.
2	16:5-12	Jesus warns his disciples against the Pharisees' teaching, rebuking the Apostles because of their misunderstanding, and putting the emphasis on his words and deeds which he has already done.
3	16:13-20	Jesus directly asks his disciples about the people's and disciples' understanding of his identity and mission. After Peter's confession that "You are the Christ," Jesus blesses Peter and gives him a certain commission and authority.
4	16:21-23	Here the first announcement of the Messiah's cross appears, yet Jesus' disciples—and particularly Peter—again misunderstand his words.
5	16:24-28	But Jesus continues and speaks about the disciples' own cross and its pains and glories closely connected to those of the Messiah's cross.

Table 1.2

This is a good overview of the general flow of events in this section of Matthew's book. But a more detailed view on a subsection of Matt. 16:13-20, which is the domain of vv.18-19, would also be useful. M. J. Wilkins proposes this structure^[7] (see Table 1.3):

<i>Part</i>	<i>Verses</i>	<i>Content</i>
1	16:13-14	The question "Who is the Son of man?" is posited and wrongly answered on the basis of people's opinions.
2	16:15-16	The question addresses the disciples and Peter pronounces his confession of Jesus the Messiah.
3	16:17-20	Jesus blesses Peter, gives him a 'rocky name', promises the immovability of his church, and imposes upon Peter an authority "to bind and loose." The closing phrase with a prohibition against telling anyone about the true identity of Christ follows.

^[7] M. J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 557-558ff; cf. Suggs, "Matthew 16:13-20," p. 291.

Table 1.3

Thus, it becomes clear that the passage Matt. 16:18-19 is part of the section which plays a central role in the Gospel of Matthew. This is the end of the first large part of the Matthean Gospel that narrates Jesus' words and actions that resulted in the final recognition of his Messiahship by Peter and, though implicitly, by the other disciples. But it is also the beginning of the second part of the Gospel that primarily speaks about the Messiah's suffering. Thus, this crucial chapter deals with Jesus' own identity as understood by himself, by his followers, by the Israelite leaders, and, finally, by the common people. Having elucidated the wrong answers one by one, the author shows the right answer and then goes on to explicate it and elaborate some other topics. This is the overall plot and structure of chapter 16.

1.3. The immediate conceptual context: An overview of the theological framework of Matthew 16

As has been said, the prevailing theme of this part of Matthew's Gospel is an identification of Jesus as God's Anointed One, the Messiah.^[8] In the midst of this Christological or messianic motif, there are also two very ecclesiological verses—verses 18 and 19. Thus, the words about the church's foundation and Peter's commission are closely connected to the notion of Jesus' identity:

- Although the term ἐκκλησία is problematic,^[9] the idea of community is natural and inevitable since there is the real Messiah. The Messiah must have the messianic community or the messianic people. As A. Oepke puts it, "The messiah without a church... – such a concept is absurd."^[10] Therefore the ἐκκλησία necessarily relates to the main theme of the chapter, because it implies the 'community of Christ'.^[11]
- The *Tu es Petrus* text is also conceptually dependant on this Christological discussion because Jesus' pronouncement about Peter is the consequence of his confession of Jesus as the Messiah.

From the Christological point of view vv.15-16 are programmatic and very important for Matthean scholars; but from the ecclesiological point of view, vv. 18-19 are indeed the crux and main locus of interest.

[8] Suggs, "Matthew 16:13-20," pp. 292-293.

[9] Scholars still debate its authenticity. For example, R. Schnakenburg, K. Giles, D. Hagner think of it as a rendering of the Old Testament terms that signify a 'community' (Hebrew *qahal*, *edah*, etc); see Rudolf Schnakenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 159; Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), pp. 36-38; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 471.

B. Robinson prefers the idea of a new temple to stand behind the purely Matthean post-Resurrection gloss of the 'church'; see Bernard P. Robinson, "Peter and His Successors: Tradition and Redaction in Matthew 16.17-19," *Journal for*

the Study of the New Testament 21, (June 1984): 93. R. Bultmann, H. Holtzmann and F. Beare reject both the dominical origin of the term and even the possible idea of Jesus' own community behind it; see Gerhard Maier, *The Church in the Gospel of Matthew: Hermeneutical Analysis of the Current Debate*, in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*, edited by D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 55.

[10] Maier, *The Church in the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 55.

[11] C. J. Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox, 2007), p. 45; Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?*, pp. 53-54, 60; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 471; Maier, *The Church in the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 55.

This research will primarily concentrate on several issues which are found in the pericope: (1) the meaning of Πέτρος and πέτρα and its relation to Peter; (2) the meaning of αἱ κλεῖδες τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν and its relation to Peter's ministry; (3) the meaning of δέω and λύω and, again, its relation to Peter's authority; and (4) the more general understanding of the "Petrine office" in the context of Matt. 16:18-19 and some other Matthean passages.

2. The Lord of the Rock(s): An inquiry into the relationship between Πέτρος and πέτρα

Until now a few suggestions concerning the interpretation of *Pe, troj* and *pe, tra* in Matt. 16:18 have been made. I will present, discuss, and assess them in order.

2.1. Peter and his "personal rock:" a differentiation of two "rocky" terms

The two nouns point to two different things: Πέτρος is a reference to Simon Peter, Jesus' disciple, whereas πέτρα with the preceding demonstrative pronoun ταύτη ("this") "points away from Peter as a person and specifies an *aspect* of him."^[12] This specification has been interpreted differently while the main philological and anthropological arguments supporting this disassociation of such a wonderful 'literary couple' as *petros* and *petra* are the same:

- a) as P. Lampe and U. Luz note, in Aramaic (which must be the language that Jesus used for this utterance)^[13] כִּבְשָׁא (כִּבְ) means "stone," not "rock," and thus cannot be a foundation,^[14] therefore it seems unlikely that Jesus could have made such an inadequate statement;
- b) moreover, as J.R. Mantey, in agreement with Liddell and Scott observes, in Greek "the most prevalent meaning for *petra* was a mass or cluster of rocks such as a cliff... *Petros*, however, always denoted a small rock or stone,"^[15]
- c) and, finally, Peter can hardly be identified with the rock as the firm foundation of the church because of his humanity and, also, his peculiar personality: "Peter, the man, is not the rock. He is too unstable."^[16]

So, *Petros* is not *petra*. But then, *what* does the πέτρα mean in Matt. 16:18?

Robinson states that this term must refer to Simon's *character* because (1) such a thing had already happened when Jesus named James and John "the Sons of Thunder" due to their hot temper, and (2) it was not necessary for Jesus to nickname his disciples with certain theological connotations. Also (3) this act of nicknaming could have had a practical reason: to distinguish between two Simons—Simon Peter

^[12] Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 563.

^[13] This statement is supported by (1) the historical fact that Aramaic was an everyday language in first-century Palestine and there was no reason for Jesus to speak to his Aramaic-speaking disciples in a different language and (2) the Semitisms which are frequently met in Matt. 16:13-20: "the rock" image, power "to bind and to loose," the "gates of Hades", etc.

^[14] Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, pp. 174-175.

^[15] Julius R. Mantey, "Distorted Translations in John 20:23; Matthew 16:18-19 and 18:1," *Review & Expositor* 78, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 412.

^[16] D. M. Doriani, *Matthew 14-28*, vol. 2 of *Matthew*, Reformed Expository Commentary, ed. Richard D. Phillips and Philip G. Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), p. 88.

and Simon the Zealot.^[17] However, the immediate context of v.18 absolutely ignores such a possibility: it speaks rather of Peter's spiritual virtues (he receives a revelation directly from the Heavenly Father and recognizes Jesus as Christ) than of his character.

Luz^[18] and Wilkins^[19] mention the ancient "Eastern" tradition of interpretation which was started by Origen, later approved by M. Luther and was recently held by, for example, F. F. Bruce: *petra* refers to the *faith* of Peter. At the same time, the great host of later (including contemporary) Eastern scholars, the representatives of the Eastern Orthodox Church, such as C. Caragounis, D. Popescu, G. Galitis, J. Karavidopoulos and others^[20] prefer the word *petra* to signify "the *confession* of faith by Peter."^[21] This view is supported by some reformed scholars, for example, D. Doriani, who calls the confession of Christ, when it is restated by all Christians, "the Church's sure foundation" and states that "Jesus did not say 'on you I will build my church' but 'on this rock I will build...' If Jesus wanted to refer to Peter... there are easier ways to do it."^[22] These associations of *petra* with faith or a sort of credo do fit in the context of chapter 16, especially vv.16-17. But, using Doriani's argument against him, why did Jesus not choose an easier way and say directly "on your faith" or "on this confession of faith" instead of ambiguous reference to the "rock?" Moreover, from the conceptual point of view there is no evidence that Matt. 16:17-18 says anything about faith or credo in the pure sense of these words. Rather, it speaks about the notions of revelation and recognition: God the Father *reveals* certain truths to Peter and, consequently, Peter *recognizes* and professes Jesus as the Messiah.

Thus, it becomes obvious that the interpretations presented are disputable. Several criticisms can be easily mounted against them. Therefore, we need to put them aside and proceed further.

2.2. Peter and the "Jesus-rock:" Another differentiation of the two "rocky" terms

Another approach is the one that follows the previous interpretation in rejecting the equality of Πέτρος and πέτρα, but differs from it in its identification of the "rock" not with something still related to Peter (e.g. faith or character), but with Jesus Christ himself. Thus, Matt. 16:18 is usually read in the light of 1 Cor. 3:11 where Paul says, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." The argument then is simple: since (a) Peter cannot be the rock and by extension the foundation for ἐκκλησία, (b) Jesus is the Saviour and hence the real founder of the Church, (c) Paul directly calls Jesus the "foundation" (θεμέλιον), it is absolutely logical to conclude that "Jesus refers to *himself* as the rock on which the church will be built."^[23] This view was first held by St. Augustine^[24] and later supported by M. Luther, J. Calvin, and other Reformers.

[17] Robinson, "Peter and His Successors," pp. 91-92.

[18] Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, pp. 169, 181.

[19] Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 563.

[20] Mentioned in Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 470, and Th. Stylianopoulos's article (see next footnote).

[21] Theodore Stylianopoulos, "Concerning the

Biblical Foundation of Primacy," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 49:1-2 (March 2004): 10; italics mine.

[22] Doriani, *Matthew 14-28*, pp. 87, 88.

[23] Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 563.

[24] Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, p. 170.

Once again the context testifies against such a reading: Jesus clearly and unequivocally addresses Peter in vv.17-18a (“Blessed are *you*, Simon... And I tell *you*, *you* are Peter...”), then speaks about “this rock” and again returns to the use of the personal pronoun in the second person (“I will give *you* the keys...”), so these verses are primarily directed toward the first disciple. The conjunction “and” between “I tell you...” and “on this rock” also “naturally signals *identification* of the halves of the wordplay than *contrast*.”^[25] There are no indications that in his “appeal” to Peter Jesus suddenly decided to say something about himself. Moreover, here Jesus explicitly identifies himself not with the foundation but with the *founder* of the church (“I will build...”), while in this given context the latter excludes the former (Carson).^[26] Therefore, the Matthean rock cannot be identified with Christ.

2.3. Peter the Rock: An identification of the two “rocky” terms

The most correct interpretation of the relation between the two terms in Matt.16:18—Πέτρος and πέτρα—is their identification. The basis for such a statement is as follows:

- (1) From the contextual and syntactical point of view (Wilkins) Πέτρος is the only recipient of Jesus’ message and the nearest, and thus the most possible, antecedent of πέτρα.^[27]
- (2) Philologically, it is not impossible that Aramaic *kepha* could have meant “rock”, and not only “a stone.” As J. Fitzmyer, W. Davies, and D. Allison note, the Qumran texts and the Targumim allow for such a usage.^[28] Also, O. Culmann states that even in Greek the words πέτρος and πέτρα are “often used interchangeably,” and this actually supports the idea of Peter being the foundation.^[29] Yet, as Hagner wisely observes, even if in practice the terms might have been used a bit differently, a “word play does not demand the usual meaning of words, especially in metaphorical applications such as present one.”^[30] So, the “rocky speech” of Jesus did not have to follow all grammatical or lexical rules of the Aramaic (or Greek) because it was a language game, using Wittgenstein’s concept, *sui generis*. The way Jesus used the term in this specific situation was more important than the classical dictionary meaning of the term.
- (3) In a bigger picture of the whole of the gospel of Matthew, it is also obvious that Peter usually has a very special place and role in the narrative: he bears the title of the “first disciple” and often acts as a spokesman and leader of the Twelve (which is especially emphasized by R. Schnakenburg, K. Giles, M. Suggs, and T. Schreiner).^[31] For instance, it is Peter who first of all the disciples is mentioned in the Matthean story (4:18) and in the list of the apostles (10:2); it is Peter who is somehow closely related to Christ in the issue of the temple tax (17:24-27);

^[25] Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 563.

^[26] Mentioned in Stylianopoulos, “Concerning the Biblical Foundation of Primacy,” p. 12.

^[27] Wilkins, *Matthew*, pp. 563-564.

^[28] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 470.

^[29] Quoted in Mantey, “Distorted Translations,” p. 411.

^[30] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 470.

^[31] Schnakenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 8; Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?*, p. 54; Suggs, “Matthew 16:13-20,” pp. 293-294; Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Glorifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 682.

again it is Peter who alone among the disciples publicly denies his relation to Jesus (26:69-75); yet it is this very Peter who confesses Jesus as the Messiah (16:16). In the light of all these texts it is no surprise that Matthew depicts Peter as the foundation of Jesus' church.

- (4) Besides these arguments, nowadays many scholars (among them Luz, Hoffmann, Schnakenburg, Schnelle, *et alii*)^[32] also mention an ecclesiological or historical one: Peter can be called the real foundation of the Christian church because he was the keeper of the Jesus tradition. F. Matera clearly explicates this idea: "Because Peter is the historical connection between Jesus and the faith of the church, he serves as the "rock" foundation on which Jesus will build the church."^[33] Thus, Πέτρος could be rightly called πέτρα due to his close relationship to Christ and his later role in the primitive Christian community's life.

All these arguments provide very well-grounded and coherent evidence for the identification of the "rock" as the foundation of the future church as the cosmic body^[34] with Simon Peter. Therefore the majority of scholars—including Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox researchers such as those already mentioned, plus O. Cullmann, L. Morris, D. Carson,^[35] C. Barrett,^[36] G. Maier,^[37] S. Hauerwas,^[38] and V. Kesich^[39]—accept this interpretation which is really the most logical. However, some scholars (P. Boumis, M. Wilkins) add that it is not simply *Peter* that is called the foundation of the church, but *this* Peter (an interpretation of "this rock"), i.e. "everything that Peter is at this very moment:"^[40] Peter sincerely believing and courageously confessing. But if Wilkins and Doriani limit Peter's status to certain conditions (the *hic et nunc* of his faith),^[41] Boumis and Kesich seem to allow for more abstract and permanent unity of Peter's personality and faith.^[42] But still, we must conclude that it is nevertheless Peter the Apostle who received the privilege to be the rock, i.e. the foundation of the Church of Christ due to his faith and confession. But "being a foundation" means certain measure of responsibility, and partly this anticipated responsibility is clarified in v.19 by means of images of key-bearing and binding/loosing.

Then in what sense is Peter the foundation? Against whom it will stand? What is Peter's responsibility? To answer these questions one has to clarify the meaning of "the gates of Hades," "the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven," and "the power to bind and loose."

[32] Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, pp. 175-176; Schnakenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 8; Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans.M. E. Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), pp. 451-452.

[33] Matera, *New Testament Theology*, p. 45.

[34] I. H. Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 124.

[35] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 470.

[36] C.K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry, and Sacraments in the New Testament*, The 1983 Didsbury Lectures (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1985), p. 17.

[37] Maier, *The Church in the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 60.

[38] Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, ed. R.R. Reno, R.W. Jenson *et al.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), pp. 150-151.

[39] Stylianopoulos, "Concerning the Biblical Foundation of Primacy," p. 11.

[40] Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 565.

[41] Doriani, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 88.

[42] Stylianopoulos, "Concerning the Biblical Foundation of Primacy," p. 11.

3. The Lord of the Keys: An inquiry into the meaning of

αὶ κλεῖδες τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν

Symbolically, a key signifies an authority or “power over something,”^[43] e.g. that of a housekeeper over the house (cf. Is. 22:20-22), whereas the typically Matthean concept “the Kingdom of Heaven” usually means “God’s dominion” (Marcus),^[44] “the Reign of God” (Schnakenburg),^[45] or “God’s rule and the realm in which the blessings of his reign are experienced” (Ladd).^[46] Thus, the “keys of the kingdom” seem to imply either the power to “activate” the rule of God or to open access to the realm of God’s full dominion.

The classic interpretation states that these ethereal keys denote Peter’s *right to control the entry into the realm of God’s re-established reign*, i.e. “to admit or deny admittance into the kingdom.”^[47] D.A. Hagner, P. Bonnard, J. Kingsbury, R. Schnakenburg, A. Schlatter, P. Matthew, and I.H. Marshall^[48] agree with such a definition of double power that a key grants to its possessor: to open or shut the doors of God’s kingdom to people.

However, Wilkins, Matera, and Marcus^[49] limit the power of the keys to only one function: *to open access to God’s blessings and eschatological kingdom*. Wilkins even restricts such an activity to three specific events described in the Book of Acts: first, Peter starts preaching the gospel and thus opens the kingdom to the Jews (Acts 2), then, second, approves the inclusion of Samaritans (Acts 8) and, finally, lets the Gentiles in (Acts 10). He (Wilkins) thinks that after this “the power of the keys” is not needed anymore, once access to God’s reign has been granted to all the peoples.^[50] But if Matera and Wilkins speak about people entering through the gates of the kingdom, Marcus prefers to think about “the extension of God’s dominion from the heavenly sphere to the earthly one.”^[51] His thesis and argumentation offer a very interesting perspective on Matt. 19, but still he and his colleagues, in limiting the *power* of the keys, also limit the meaning of the *image* itself: Jesus does not speak of “the right to open” or “the power to give access to or send out of the kingdom of Heaven.” He mentions only “the keys,” without any qualification or specification; and naturally that means that they can both open and shut, lock and unlock. This is the normal function of a key.

Consequently, it is absolutely logical to state that the classic view is the best grounded interpretation of Matt. 16:19a, although some other positions also exist.^[52]

^[43] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 472.

^[44] Joel Marcus, “The Gates of Hades and the Keys of the Kingdom (Matt 16:18-19),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (July 1988): 447.

^[45] Schnakenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 159.

^[46] G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., edited by Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), p. 117.

^[47] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 472.

^[48] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 472; Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 566 n. 44; Schnakenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 159; Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” p. 447; Parackel K. Mathew, “Authority and

Discipline: Matt. 16.17-19 and 18.15-18 and the Exercise of Authority and Discipline in the Matthean Community,” *Communio viatorum* 28, no. 3-4 (Wint 1985): 122; Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, p. 124.

^[49] Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 566; Matera, *New Testament Theology*, p. 46; Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” pp. 47, 455.

^[50] Wilkins, *Matthew*, pp. 566-567.

^[51] Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” p. 447.

^[52] E.g. Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?*, p. 54: Giles regards the possession of the keys and the power to bind and loose as indicators of an idea of Peter’s leadership in general, which fits the

And according to this interpretation, Peter has the right to decide who can be a part of Jesus' kingdom and, accordingly, the church, and who cannot,^[53] being thus responsible for *inclusion* in and *excommunication* from the community. Therefore, in the Matthean setting Peter appears as “the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven” who can finally re-open the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven after the Jewish scribes locked them (23:13) and take control of the gates out of the Pharisees' hands.^[54]

4. The Lord of the Boundaries: An inquiry into the meaning of δέω and λύω

The literal meaning of these two verbs—δέω and λύω—cannot help here since it is obvious that in Matt. 16:19 Jesus is not speaking about the actions of tying and untying. But *what* he really is talking about is still under discussion. In general, both the images (of “the keys” and the “binding-loosing” process) indicate “a genuine fullness of authority conferred on Peter,”^[55] but a more specific explanation is somewhat uncertain. Until now the following suggestions have been made:

- (1) Hiers tentatively states that “in early Jewish sources and elsewhere in the NT, including in sayings attributed to Jesus, the terms ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’ commonly refer to the binding of Satan (Beliar, etc.) and the exorcism of demons.”^[56] However, the common use of a term does not necessarily determine its meaning in each particular situation; rather, the “*context* profoundly influences the meaning of anything.”^[57] Besides this, the idea of exorcism is alien to the context of Matt. 16 and Jesus' words “*whatever* you bind... and *whatever* you loose... [italics mine]” (NRSV) (ὃ ἕαν δῆσης... καὶ ὃ ἕαν λύσης...). Hiers has to admit this and therefore he ascribes the “whatever” phrase and change of the context to Matthew's authorization.^[58] Nevertheless, it is the Matthean text that we have, not a verbatim record of Jesus' words as they were spoken, so Hiers' argumentation is quite weak (so think Marcus and Powell).^[59]
- (2) F. Büshel and G. Ladd read Matt. 16:19 in light of 18:18 and interpret δέω and λύω as “*excluding from and accepting back into the community.*”^[60] Close to them

context but is too vague a definition. See also Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 115: Ladd, in accord with R. Flew, defines the keys as “the spiritual insight which will enable Peter to lead others in through the door of revelation...” However, this interpretation is too spiritualized and omits the symbolism of the key-image which, actually, signifies real authority.

^[53] For more support for the close connection between “the kingdom of God/Heaven” and “the church” see Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 110-117; Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 123-125; Matera, *New Testament Theology*, p. 47.

^[54] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 473.

^[55] Schnakenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 159-160.

^[56] Richard H. Hiers, “‘Binding’ and ‘Losing’: The Matthean Authorizations,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (1985): 240.

^[57] R. J. Erickson, *A Beginner's Guide to New Testament Exegesis* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 62; italics mine.

^[58] Hiers, “‘Binding’ and ‘Losing,’” pp. 241, 249.

^[59] Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” p. 450; Mark Allan Powell, “Binding and Loosing: A Paradigm for Ethical Discernment from the Gospel of Matthew,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30, no. 6 (December 2003): 438.

^[60] F. Büshel, “*Deo*”, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, 2:60-61, discussed in Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 473, and Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” p. 451. Cf. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 116.

is P. Matthew, who also binds the two Matthean verses together, although he broadens the scope of Peter's authority and speaks of binding or loosing "whatever, including men." Yet for him, the "*men* in the church" are primary objects of this power.^[61] Thus, in outline, he agrees with Bushel's contour of thought. It is even consistent with the classic definition of the mission of the key-holder in v.19a, but, again, this interpretation is not convincing in the context of v.19b, since it limits Matthew's ὁ ἕκαστος to only one of all possible meanings and, therefore, is not thoroughly fair to the biblical text.

- (3) J. Mantey and D. Doriani confidently state that the right to bind or loose certain things on earth is nothing more than *responsibility to ratify, obey and declare what has already been determined by divine will*. Still the reason for such a confidence may be different: Doriani, as a real Reformed Christian, states that we can only trust God and his message about salvation already achieved in Christ,^[62] whereas Mantey grounds his opinion on the future perfect tense used in v.19b. He highlights the grammar of the phrase "ὁ ἐὰν δήσῃς ἔσται δεδεμένος καὶ ὁ ἐὰν λύσῃς ἔσται λελυμένος", where ἔσται δεδεμένος and ἔσται λελυμένος stand in the perfect passive, which usually emphasizes an extension of the present result of the past action. Thus, in his opinion, the correct translation of the passage is "...whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been so released in heaven." Then the power to "tie or untie" simply refers to an announcement of God's decisions.^[63] In response Marcus rightly notes, that the question is "whether the tense can be pressed to this extent,"^[64] but supposes that the literary context with its idea of revelation to Peter (vv.16-17) and discussion on the Pharisees' teaching (vv.5-12) do support an interpretation of the right to bind/loose as "the interpretation of the law that has been decided in heaven... [and thus] total power on earth to distinguish valid from invalid prohibitions."^[65] So, in terms of Marcus' argumentation, this "ratification theory" is quite good, yet, not perfect, because the *Christological revelation* given to Peter (vv.16-17) and his *ecclesial authority* bestowed by Jesus in vv.18-19 are different topics, as well as the concepts of *revelation* and *divine will*. Neither revelation, nor order of implementation of the divine will is the main issue in Matt.16:18-19,^[66] and the tense alone is not a thoroughly adequate ground for making conclusions about a *diachronic order* of events, since "[t]ense... indicates *the kind* of action expressed by the verb... [whereas] time of action is secondary to kind of action."^[67] Therefore, it is necessary to conclude that "the tenses alone do not resolve the issue."^[68]

- (4) H. Basser (after his investigation of possible Hebrew terms which might have stood behind δέω and λύω in Matt. 16:19) suggests that the preferable Hebrew

^[61] Mathew, "Authority and Discipline," p. 122.

^[62] Doriani, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 90.

^[63] Mantey, "Distorted Translations," pp. 410-411.

^[64] Marcus, "The Gates of Hades," p. 448.

^[65] *Ibid*, p. 452.

^[66] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 474.

^[67] J. A. Brooksand and C. L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), pp. 75-76.

^[68] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, p. 683 n. 33.

equivalent to the two Greek words is the pair of verbs פתח / סגר, which usually mean “set free” and “put into chains.” Given the testimony from the *Didascalia Apostolorum* he extends this meaning to “the power to free one from the punishments of sin or to keep one doomed because of sin.”^[69] This view is very interesting, but emphasis on one of possible meanings of Hebrew terms, hypothetically standing behind the Greek ones, is not an unshakable foundation.^[70] Nevertheless, the idea of a power to grant or refuse the forgiveness of sins is not new: it sees the necessary parallel between Matt. 16:19 and John 20:23, and interprets v.19b through the lens of v.19a where Peter receives “the keys of the kingdom” — i.e. the right to grant or refuse entrance into the realm of divine rule and forgiveness of sins (thus R. Bultmann, A. Schlatter, A. Schweitzer).^[71] This might be a possible reading of the text only if the addition of Johannine concept to Matthean text is justified, what in recent scholarship is considered to be incorrect.^[72]

- (5) Another approach suggests that permission to de,w and lu,w should be read in the light of the rabbinic usage of these verbs where this pair means “specific, practical interpretation of the Torah, the determination of what was permitted and what was forbidden,”^[73] and “the authority to exclude from or readmit to the synagogue.”^[74] Thus, in Matt. 16:19 Peter is given authority to pronounce judgment on the matters of “behaviour that is permitted or forbidden, teaching that is legitimate or false, and by implication forgiveness of sins or the refusal to grant such.”^[75] This is the view generally held by Hagner and Schreiner, quoted before, and also M. Powell, M. Suggs, R. Schnakenburg, F. Matera, K. Stendahl, and F. Beare.^[76]

The last interpretation (which also embraces the last but one, and by extension the second suggestion) is, to my mind, the best one because it corresponds well to (a) the parallel saying about the keys, symbolizing the right to include and exclude, (b) the Matthean image of Christ whereby Jesus is portrayed as the new law-giver, the new Moses (especially, Matt. 5-7) who brings to the fore the true meaning of the Law and teaches his disciples to continue his mission (Matt. 28:18-20),^[77] and (c) the literary context of v.19b, i.e. vv.17-19. Here Jesus pronounces an ecclesiological utterance and definitely speaks about authority and responsibility (the images of the keys and of the firm foundation confirm it), yet does not specify this responsibility too narrowly, allowing Peter to bind or loose ὃ ἐὰν, i.e. “whatever.” Thus, the idea of the authority to settle the issues of both theory (teaching) and practice (excommu-

^[69] Herbert W. Bassler, “Derrett’s ‘Binding’ Reopened,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (1985): 299-300.

^[70] For a more detailed critique see Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” p. 450; Powell, “Binding and Loosing,” pp. 450-451.

^[71] Hiers, “‘Binding’ and ‘Loosing,’” pp. 234-235; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 473.

^[72] Powell, “Binding and Loosing,” pp. 438-439.

^[73] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 473.

^[74] Suggs, “Matthew 16:13-20,” p. 295.

^[75] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, p. 682 n. 32.

^[76] Powell, “Binding and Loosing,” p. 440; Suggs, “Matthew 16:13-20,” p. 295; Schnakenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 160; Matera, *New Testament Theology*, p. 46; Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 567 n. 50.

^[77] Powell, “Binding and Loosing,” p. 440; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 473.

nication, inclusion, and promulgation of ethical norms) in the context of Jesus' church (or community) fits well in this passage, albeit the logical order between the earthly and heavenly decisions remains unclear and, as a consequence, undefined.^[78] Here it is enough to say that, as it is indicated in v.19b, Peter receives the right to speak and pronounce authoritative decisions *on behalf of God*, and these decisions are *in accord with God's will*.^[79]

But the attentive reader surely remembers that God's will and God's kingdom are not the only characters of Jesus' speech here analyzed. There is an opponent to the Kingdom of Heaven—the Gates of Hell. It is not critical to discuss the meaning of this concept here, but since it plays a certain role in Matt. 16:18-19 and might shed some light on Peter's function in the church according to St. Matthew, it is logical to examine it in brief.

5. The Lord against Hades: A short inquiry into the meaning of πύλαι ᾗδου

In general, as Schreiner, Hagner and Wilkins rightly point out, the term πύλαι ᾗδου is a translation of a typically Jewish concept from the Old Testament – שַׁעַר יְשַׁעַל (“the gates of Sheol,” i.e. the gates of the realm of the dead).^[80] But this concept might have different connotations, depending on the context. The following suggestions about the meaning of this phrase in Matt. 16:18 have been made:

- (1) J. Marcus, following J. Meier and F. Beare, suggests that this might be an example of the ordinary usage of the term: “*the abode of the dead*.”^[81]
- (2) Schreiner himself supposes that here (i.e. in Matt. 16:18) the pu,lai a[|dou is a metaphor simply meaning *death*. This reading is supported by several texts from the Old Testament: e.g. Job 17:16, Is. 38:10, plus some passages in Greek from the Deutero-canonical books (Wis. 16:13, 3 Macc. 5:51, etc).^[82] Close to this is Wilkins' notion of the “power of death”^[83] and Schnakenburg's “the powers of the underworld,” which designate “the annihilating power of death, not, for instance, Satan and his realm.”^[84] Thus, these scholars seem to imply an idea of Jesus' everlasting and immovable church (built on Peter) as opposed to a natural danger of dying and destruction, and their view is shared by many others (E. Schweizer, D. Hill, D. Doriani,^[85] *et alii*).
- (3) Another option is to see “the gates of hell” as a *pars pro toto*, since in the Old Testament שַׁעַר is frequently used this way (for example, “the gates of the city” often means “the city” like in Deut. 16:5, Ruth 3:11, 1 Kgs. 8:37, etc).^[86] Consequently, Matt. 16:18c must speak of *hell itself* as the enormous reality of the

^[78] For clear and concise review of the three main views about this order see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, p. 682 n. 33.

^[79] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 474; Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, p. 683 n. 33.

^[80] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, p. 682 n. 31; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 471; Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 565.

^[81] Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” p. 444.

^[82] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 682, 682 n. 31.

^[83] Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 565.

^[84] Schnakenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 159.

^[85] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 471; Doriani, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 89.

^[86] Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” pp. 445-446.

underworld with everyone and everything that is in it. Hauerwas seems to be in favour of this vague view,^[87] while Marcus even adds that “hell” or “Hades” mean not only “the underworld,” but specifically its inhabitants and rulers, who march out of the literal gates of their “dark motherland” to attack human beings. He finds this vision in Jewish apocalyptic literature and then draws a conclusion about these “gates of hell” as the antitype of the “gates of the kingdom of Heaven” in the next verse.^[88]

- (4) Giles,^[89] together with Gundry,^[90] agrees with Schreiner but modifies his vague notion of death: it can be “the threat of *death by martyrdom*” [italics mine] that is in view (especially in the light of Matt.16:21, 24-27 and later experience of persecution initiated by Nero around 60 A.D. and by other local or imperial authorities after that), although the idea of demonic assault is also possible.
- (5) The last variant is argued for and thoroughly supported by R. Hiers who sees the gates as a reference to *Satan* himself or his *demons* and their power.^[91]

All this is possible, yet it is unlikely that Jesus or Matthew used the image of the gates of Sheol in its basic sense, because Peter as a living person could not deal with the realm of the dead. Also the text and its immediate context do not support such a narrow reading as that of Hiers: there are no hints indicating that Jesus was here talking about Satan as an individual being. Plus, there were simpler ways to mention him in the context of the Matthean book (cf. Matt. 13:19 or 25, etc, where Jesus uses terms ὁ πονηρὸς (“the evil one,” NRSV) and ὁ ἐχθρὸς (“an enemy” NRSV) to designate Satan).

All in all, the more generic notions of *death*^[92] (so Schreiner, Wilkins, Schnakenburg, Schweizer, Hill, Doriani) or the more specific “the threat of *death by martyrdom*” (so Giles and Gundry)^[93] are fairly adequate. Also good is the idea of “the gates of Hades” signifying *hell as a whole* with all its powers and inhabitants (so Marcus and Hauerwas).^[94] Both interpretations fit very well and conform with the tone of Matt. 16:17-20: the foundation of the church has to stand against “the gates of Hades,” which means that it has to either survive through the coming times of trouble and threat of death, or to defend itself against the strong spiritual enemy who has both the human—or, rather, demonic—and material resources (inhabitants of hell and powers of hell). Both interpretations are equally possible due to the lack of clarity in the text itself

Yet, all this being said, now a wider look is necessary to bind (and not loose!) together all the images and phrases of Matt. 16:18-19, to discern the Peter’s relationship to them, and make conclusions about Jesus’ commission to him. Then we will be able to come to a better understanding of the theological meaning of “the rock” and “the keys of the kingdom” in Matthew 16:18-19.

[87] Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p. 150.

[88] Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” pp. 445, 447.

[89] Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?*, p. 54.

[90] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 471.

[91] Hiers, “‘Binding’ and ‘Losing,’” pp. 242-243.

[92] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 682, 682 n. 31; Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 565; Schnakenburg, *The*

Gospel of Matthew, p. 159; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 471; Doriani, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 89.

[93] Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?*, p. 54; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 471.

[94] Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” pp. 445-446; Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p. 150.

6. The Lord of the Keys: Theological conclusions about Peter's commission and mission in the Matthean context

Since some obscure or too symbolic images have been clarified, the re-reading and re-interpretation of the text Matt. 16:18-19 is now available. It should look like this:

And Jesus answered him, "Simon... Your nickname is 'the Rock', and precisely on this rock I will found my community, and the powers of evil when they come out of their gates and march to attack you¹⁹⁵¹ will not prevail against it. I will give you the right to decide and declare, who can be a part of my kingdom and my church and who cannot, and the authority to pronounce judgment on matters of teaching, moral norms and any practical issues in my church: you will do that on my and my Father's behalf."

So, as it should be clear from the previous discussion and this re-translation, Peter is definitely distinguished from the other disciples: he is called the rock which is to be the foundation of the church, what can be interpreted as receiving a special responsibility that is crucial for the emergence (Jesus says, "I *will* build my church," thus implying that church has not come into existence yet) and continuous well-being (Jesus promises that "the gates of Hades will not prevail," i.e. will *never* prevail against it) of the church. The nature and extent of Peter's responsibility is defined and clarified in the next verse: he should exercise the "sacred doctrinal and juridical authority"¹⁹⁶¹ in Jesus' community, having the right of *jurisdictio* – the pronouncement of binding rules. But some comments should be made concerning Peter's ministry as it fits with the flow of thought in the whole of the Gospel of Matthew.

First of all, Jesus' words of blessing and commissioning (vv.17-19) are preceded and even determined by Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah (v.16). It is because of this profession that Peter becomes a recipient of Jesus' blessing. But in the Gospel of Matthew, Petrine confession is not the very first: Cephas only repeats what the disciples have already admitted (14:33). After Jesus walks on the sea, saves Peter, and calms the storm the apostles worship him and say, "Truly you are the Son of God" (NRSV). Moreover, earlier in chapter 13, Matthean Jesus pronounces a blessing on his disciples who see and hear divinely revealed truths (vv.11, 16-17). Thus, one might conclude that Peter does what all the disciples did before and receives what all of them should have received, yet it does not follow from what the author of the Gospel tells us. The aforementioned passages do differ from each other.

- In chapter 13 Jesus calls his disciples blessed (μακάριοι) because they *see* Jesus' deeds and *listen* to his words, but in chapter 16 Peter receives a *revelation* from Jesus' Heavenly Father.
- In chapter 14 the apostles call Jesus "the Son of God" (ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς εἶ) which happens for the first time in the Gospel, but Peter calls him "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος), i.e. he adds one significant and theologically radical title—the *Messiah*—to the phrase "the son of God."
- Also, in chapter 14 the disciples make their exclamation after seeing several *miracles* in a row, whereas in chapter 16 the context is an *ordinary journey* and an

¹⁹⁵¹ Or "...when death threatens you...."

¹⁹⁶¹ Schnakenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 160.

unusually straightforward discussion over the identity of Jesus, during which Peter actually confesses Christ in contrast to various (and wrong) existing opinions.

- As Jesus recognizes in 16:17-18, “Peter is the *personal* recipient of revelation from the Father, which is a *personal* blessing to him,”^[97] followed by *personal* commission from the just-confessed Christ (note the person of verb and pronouns: μακάριος εἶ, ἀπεκάλυψέν σοι, κἀγὼ δέ σοι λέγω, etc).

Thus, it is obvious that texts from chapters 13, 14, and 16 of the Matthew’s story stand in a single line of thought—the Christological one—but each passage has its own peculiarities, and the verses 16:15-16 are the climax of this part of the Gospel,^[98] immediately followed by Jesus’ ecclesiological *tu es Petrus* speech. This speech gives Peter a special value, since he is more than an ordinary representative of the twelve: he alone confesses, and he alone receives a task from Jesus (at that point and at that moment).

However, it has been suggested that the pro-Petrine text 16:17-19 and the more “democratic” text 18:15-18 must be seen as parallel or complementary to each other because (a) both texts speak about the church, (b) in both texts the main issue is authority and discipline, and (c) 18:18 is absolutely parallel to 16:19b with only one slight difference: the singular addressee becomes plural.^[99] Thus it seems that Matthew “democratizes” his earlier text, and v.18:18 is indeed the modification of v.16:19: Peter’s authority to pronounce judgements in the church is now shared among all the disciples (so Schnelle, Stylianopoulos)^[100] and later by extension to each local community (Giles)^[101] and the universal church as a whole (Powell, Ladd).^[102]

Such an explanation reflects well the development of Matthew’s thought (Jesus gives the authority to bind and loose to all the disciples *after* he has ascribed that mission to Peter alone, therefore the later command modifies the earlier) and seemingly fits in the big picture of the Gospel (e.g., the programmatic texts 10:5 and 28:18-20, where Jesus sends his “students” out and urges his followers to continue his mission on the Earth but says *nothing about Peter alone*, addressing his words of commission(s) to *all* his disciples). It portrays Peter as a representative of the Twelve and *primus inter pares*, where *primus* means a kind of relative leadership, or simply chronological primacy.

Nevertheless, this approach fails to recognise two important things:^[103]

- The difference of the themes of two passages: 16:17-19 speaks about the *universal church* as a cosmic reality whereas 18:18-20 is about a *local congregation*; and
- only partial overlapping of the authority described and ascribed: chapter 16 uses the terms of binding-loosing *and* the image of the “super-keys” whereas chapter 18 mentions only the first concept.

Therefore, it is absolutely correct to conclude that in the Gospel of Matthew the authority to bind and loose, i.e. to *make authoritative decisions on theology, ethics, and*

^[97] Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 561.

^[98] E.g., Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 463.

^[99] E.g., Powell, “Binding and Loosing,” p. 119ff.

^[100] Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 452; Stylianopoulos, “Concerning the Biblical Foundation of Primacy,” pp. 15-16.

^[101] Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?*, p. 61.

^[102] Powell, “Binding and Loosing,” p. 443ff; Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 116.

^[103] Matera, *New Testament Theology*, p. 46; Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, p. 124.

practice within the local communities, is granted to all the apostles, while in matters of *excommunication*, the opinion of the whole congregation should be respected (18:17). At the same time *the authority to exclude from or accept into the realm of God's rule (i.e. church but not exclusively)*^[104] and *resolve the issues of Christian teaching and praxis on a broader, universal scale* is given to Peter alone.^[105] “If this is so, the Matthean text ascribes a unique role to Peter as the foundation stone of Jesus’ church, the one entrusted with rabbinic-like authority to bind and loose in matters of teaching related to the kingdom of heaven.”^[106] Hagner, Schnakenburg, and Hauerwas agree with Matera on such a conclusion,^[107] but Luz gives an interesting comment: even “[i]f Peter becomes the ‘rock man’ of the church... this rock cannot be transferred to others by succession.”^[108] Thus, he evokes the question about the classic post-Tridentine Roman Catholic interpretation of Matt. 16:18-19, according to which the text gives something like absolute authority to the living church’s foundation and the *vicarius Christi* mission to Peter and his successors—the Roman pontiffs.

Yet, in fact, neither the text nor its wider context (chapter 16 and the whole book of Matthew) could support the doctrine of the papacy. There are no unequivocal indications concerning Peter’s anticipated successors, and even the image of the “rocky foundation” does not fit with the notion of succession. And although Peter does have a special ministry and responsibility in the Matthean account, he does not exercise it *over* the other disciples and Christ’s church but *within* the community^[109] and therefore is rightly regarded as “the first among the equals.” As T. Stylianopoulos wisely puts it, “the ‘primacy’ of Peter is not power over other apostolic figures but an authorized leadership in the context of shared apostolic authority in the common life of the church.”^[110]

Nevertheless, the Petrine ministry might be seen as *needing a succession* of exercisers in the future due to the following reasons:

- if “the power of the keys” and the ministry of ‘universal binding and loosing’ in church affairs imply the *ordinary* and *regular* exercise of a kind of control or apostolic ministry within the church, they should be put into effect regularly and, thus, continuously;^[111]
- if Matthew included such a Petrine passage in his Gospel after Peter’s death, it must have had certain importance for his readers. Otherwise, “it is difficult to conceive a

^[104] See, for example, the discussion on the relations between the Kingdom of God and the Church in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), s.v. “Church” and “Kingdom of God / Kingdom of Heaven;” Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 110-117; Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 123-125.

^[105] It should be noted, that though Matt. 18:18-19 belongs to the passage which is primarily concerned about the local congregation (cf. 18:15-17 and 20), it might be interpreted as a *universal* principle: the words “whatever... on earth...” (ὅσα ἐὰν... ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) allow for a more generic interpretation.

Nevertheless, the literary context is quite ambiguous, and thus a search for a better understanding of Matt. 18:18 could be very useful for this discussion.

^[106] Matera, *New Testament Theology*, p. 46.

^[107] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 474; Schnakenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 8, 160; Hauerwas, *Matthew*, pp. 150-151.

^[108] Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, p. 177.

^[109] See Matera, *New Testament Theology*, p. 46; Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 561.

^[110] Stylianopoulos, “Concerning the Biblical Foundation of Primacy,” p. 24.

^[111] *Ibid*, p. 16.

reason why these two late texts should be so concerned to emphasize the role of the now dead Peter as strengthener and shepherd of his brethren. If, on the other hand, a Petrine office survived his death, the passages would be readily intelligible.”^[112]

Thus, it is logical to conclude that Peter *might* have had a successor(s) for his ministry: it is absolutely possible, though not decisively proved. But the idea of Peter’s succession, as it is hypothetically implied in the Matthean story of Jesus’ life, neither supports nor denies the Roman Catholic belief that a bishop of Rome is an “heir of Peter:” this doctrine is the later theological construct that has almost nothing to do with New Testament theology in general and the Gospel of Matthew in particular.

In any case, the main issue of Matt. 16:18-19 is not Peter’s successors or Peter’s personality; the main thing is *Jesus’* imposition of *ecclesial* authority and responsibility upon Peter. Simon “the Rock” does receive power to make decisions in the church: but he has to do it *for the church of Christ and on God’s behalf*.

Conclusion

According to what has been just presented and discussed, the passage examined (Matt. 16:18-19) is a very interesting and even intriguing text. It uses complicated imagery, curious wordplay and unusual imperatives. Yet, thanks to many scholars’ endeavor, exegetical and theological tools, and some kind of logic it is quite easy, let alone necessary, to come to the following conclusion.

For Matthew Christological and ecclesiological issues are very crucial, and they are actually intertwined. This has been perfectly demonstrated in chapter 16: Peter’s (purely Christological) confession was pronounced in the context of Jesus’ conversation with his first community, viz. the disciples, and it resulted in the bestowing of certain responsibilities in and for the church. Thus, strong and close links between the person of Jesus and the nature of the church, and between the belief in Jesus the Messiah and the high responsibility in the Messianic community were established. It is Jesus to whom real and supreme authority belongs: he possessed the keys of the Kingdom and the power over death. Then he entrusted them to a specific person, viz. Simon Peter, thus officially making him the spiritual leader of the apostles. But he did so only after Peter had professed him as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Thus, Peter became the rock, the foundation of the Church of Christ, due to his faith and confession.

But this unique title meant not honour, but labour. Now Peter was responsible for settling the issues of both theory (doctrinal teaching) and practice (excommunication, inclusion, disciplining) in Jesus’ church. He was even allowed to pronounce authoritative decisions on behalf of God, or, at least, in accord with God’s will. But such a difficult task had to be carried on in the light of the wonderful promise of Christ who said that He will control the process of building of the church himself. He *will* build it and make it strong, so that the gates of Hades will *never* prevail against it. But the first stone of its foundation and the first authoritative leader of the newly-born community had to be fully human—and it was Peter the Rock.

^[112] Robinson, “Peter and His Successors,” p. 98.

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