Mat. 16:16-19 – The Confession, the Rock, the Gates, and the Keys

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Matthew 16:16-19 raises difficult questions for an interpreter that have been debated for millennia. Rather than address the many different understandings that have been proposed, which would require writing a book, I here attempt to express concisely the understanding that makes the most sense to me.[1] I hope it is helpful.

Matthew 16:13-20 states (my translation):

> [13] Now when Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" [14] And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." [15] He said to them, "But you, who do you say that I am?" [16] In response, Simon Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." [17] Answering, Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. [18] And I say to you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not be able to defeat it. [19] I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven." [20] Then he ordered the disciples that they should tell no one that he is the Christ.

The city of Caesarea Philippi was about twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Having entered the region of the city in route to the villages around it (Mk. 8:27), Jesus asked the disciples who the people say that he is ("Son of Man" being a common self-reference for Jesus). They report that some say John the Baptist (meaning the spirit of John was in some sense at work in him), others say Elijah (who was expected to return as a herald of the coming end), and still others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets (of long ago). Interestingly, no one is reported to be claiming he is the Messiah (the Christ), which highlights Peter's confession.

1. The Confession

Jesus asks the disciples in v. 15 who they say he is, and Peter answers in v. 16 saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." In identifying Jesus as "the Christ," Peter declared his conviction that Jesus is "the promised Savior from the line of David, who will accomplish God's end-time salvation and establish God's eternal kingdom in justice and righteousness (2 Sam. 7:11-16; Isa 9:1-5; 11:1-10)."[2] In identifying him as the "Son of God," he confessed his belief that Jesus, the Messiah, is no ordinary descendant of David but one who is uniquely related to God.

[1] The discussion includes some material I have written elsewhere.
[2] Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 361.

Jesus responds to Peter's declaration by stating in v. 17, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." He wants Peter to know that his belief in the truth of his identity was a blessing from the Father, the result of the Father's revelatory work, and not the product of mere human effort ("flesh and blood" is an idiom for that which is human). It was the Father who enlightened him, who revealed the truth of Jesus' identity to him through the Jewish Scriptures, through Jesus' words and actions, and presumably through other works of prevenient grace, and therefore the Father (who acts in unity with the Son and the Spirit) is to be praised for that belief. The belief itself is a blessing from his hand. The fact Peter accepted rather than rejected the divine revelation about Jesus does not negate the fact his belief was a work of God, any more than accepting a friend's revelation about an unknown cure for cancer denies the friend credit for one's lifesaving belief in that cure. Those who refuse to believe in spite of the revelation own that refusal, whereas those who believe because of the revelation are grateful for and indebted to the revealer, the one who enabled and produced their belief.

2. The Rock

Information about some Aramaic and Greek words and about Peter's various names is helpful for understanding verse 18. Peter's given name at birth was the Aramaic name *Shim'on*, which is transliterated into Greek both as *Simōn* (Σίμων) and *Sumeōn* (Συμεών). During the first contact between Jesus and some of his disciples, an event not mentioned in the Synoptics, Jesus gave Simon the Aramaic nickname *kêpā'* (Jn. 1:28-42), which is transliterated into Greek as *Kēphas* (Κηφᾶς, Jn. 1:42). That word originally referred to a massive rock or rock formation, but it gradually came to be used for a smaller stone.[3] The Greek equivalent of Simon's Aramaic nickname was *Petros* (Jn. 1:42), which as a nickname is transliterated into English as Peter.

In earlier literature, *petros* normally referred to a smaller loose stone, whereas the Greek word *petra* normally referred to a massive rock or rock formation, but even then, the words occasionally were used interchangeably, a practice that became more frequent over time. *Petros* eventually faded from use, *petra* assumed the meaning of a loose stone, and *brachos* came to be used for a massive rock or boulder.[4] "The LXX and NT usages belong to the transition period."[5]

Jesus says in v. 18: "And I tell you, you are Peter [*Petros*], and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not be able to defeat it." In the Greek language in which the inspired Matthew reported the statement, there clearly is a wordplay between Peter's nickname (*Petros*) and the rock (*petra*) on which Jesus promised to build his church, but they are different words. Jesus does not say that he will build the church on Peter (*Petros*) but on "this rock" (*tautē tē petra*). Not only are the words different, but the use of the demonstrative pronoun ("this") reinforces the distinction. As David Garland states, "The demonstrative pronoun 'this' logically should refer to something other than the speaker or the one spoken to and would be appropriate only if Jesus were speaking about Peter in the third person and not speaking directly

[3] Chrys C. Caragounis, *Peter and the Rock* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 116.
[4] Caragounis, 116; see also, John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 669.
[5] Nolland, 669.

to him. If Jesus were referring to Peter, it would have been clearer to have, 'You are Rock, and upon you I will build my church' (Caragounis, *Peter and the Rock*, 89)."[6]

Though many disagree, including some notable Evangelical scholars, I am convinced that the rock on which Jesus says he will build his church, the unshakeable foundation of that edifice (Mat. 7:24-25), is the truth of his identity that Peter just confessed, the truth that would be proclaimed by the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). Garland comments:

> To recognize that Peter was a prominent leader of the early church does not entail that he was its foundation. The rock upon which Christ's church is built is the confession, revealed by the Father, that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. The answers of others about who Jesus is offer him nothing on which to build. Peter's confession does. . . .
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> This interpretation satisfactorily allows the pronoun "this" to refer to what Peter said. It also fits the context, which concerns the identity of Jesus, not the significance of Peter. Jesus first raises the question of his identity, and Peter provides the correct answer. The concluding words in 16:20 enjoin the disciples to say nothing about what has been revealed to them, namely, that Jesus is the Christ, not that Peter is the rock upon which Christ's church will be built. Just as the disciples are to build on the bedrock (*petra*) of the authoritative teaching of the Christ (7:24), so Christ will build his church on the disciples' confession in response to God's revelation.[7]

Caragounis expresses the meaning this way: *"As sure as you are [called] Πέτρος, on this rock [i.e. of what you have just said, sc. that I am the Christ] I shall build my Church."* He explains, "The solemn words of Peter's declaration are responded to by an even more solemn declaration, one that fastens on the meaning of Peter's name, who just gave expression to the πέτρα of the Church."[8] Malcolm Yarnell says, "Yes, the *petra* has something to do with Peter, but the *petra* is not *Petros*. *Petra* is the confession of *Petros*; *petra* points to Jesus Christ."[9] Joel Green observes:

> The nature of the wordplay in Matthew 16:18, from the masculine noun *petros* ("rock") to the feminine noun *petra* ("rock"), makes it difficult simply to equate Peter (*petros*) the apostle with *petra* ("bedrock") on which the church is built; Jesus' point is focused rather on the foundational apostolic testimony to Jesus' identity as "Messiah, Son of the living God," a revelation originating with the heavenly Father (Mt 16:1-17).[10]

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[6] David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2001), 173.
[7] Garland, 174.
[8] Caragounis, 117.
[9] Malcolm B. Yarnell III, "'Upon this Rock I Will Build My Church' A Theological Exposition of Matthew 16:13-20" in Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, eds., *Upon This Rock: The Baptist Understanding of the Church* (Nashville, B&H Academic, 2010), 35.
[10] Joel B. Green, "Kingdom of God/Heaven" in Joel B. Green, ed., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 475.

Evidence from the early Syrian church reinforces the view that *petra* in Mat. 16:18 does not refer to Peter. Caragounis concludes:

> The Syriac evidence can only tell us how the words [of Mat. 16:18] were understood by the Syrian Church, say, one hundred years or so after they were written. The examination of the various Syrian translations shows quite clearly that the Syrian Christians understood πέτρα as referring to something other than Peter, and strove accordingly in various ways to preserve the distinction between Πέτρος and πέτρα. In this regard the Syriac evidence confirms the conclusion reached earlier from the Greek evidence.[11]

It is often asserted that Peter's identity as the rock on which Jesus builds his church is clear in the Aramaic language in which Jesus presumably spoke. The claim is that for there to be a wordplay in Aramaic corresponding to the Greek wordplay in Mat. 16:18, Jesus had only one option, which was to use the same Aramaic word for rock in both places (*kêpā'*). But even if that were true, the fact Matthew used different Greek words in reporting the statement means that Jesus intended the Aramaic word to have a different nuance in its two occurrences. In other words, the Spirit through Matthew is bringing out in Greek a distinction between Peter and the rock that Jesus intended in Aramaic, even if he used the same word. In any event, it is not true that an Aramaic wordplay would require Jesus to repeat the same word. As Caragounis explains:

> The discussion of the Word-play indicated that this is a very misunderstood subject, and that assertions are being made which fly in the face of the evidence. The reference of πέτρα to Πέτρος has as its corner-stone the postulate that the Aramaic text was כיפא-כיפא, because only such a repetition of the same word could constitute a perfect word-play, and the further corollary that the Greek by using two different words actually has "destroyed" the word-play. An examination of word-plays in Greek literature, the Hebrew OT, the LXX, and the NT reveals that there are many different types of word-play, that it is not necessary to use the same word twice, that many word-plays actually have very little sound similarity, and more importantly, that there are also word-plays that are based not on sound, but on sense, ideas, and associations. This undercuts completely the unsubstantiated assumption that the original Aramaic was כיפא-כיפא, showing that considerations of the word-play do not in any way exclude the use of טנרא, which was the usual Aramaic word for Heb: צור = LXX: πέτρα at this time (viz. in the Targumim).[12]

The understanding that the rock on which Jesus will build his church is Peter's confession of faith and not Peter himself has deep historical roots. Indeed, it is the view "found in the earliest extant commentary on this text (by Origen)."[13] It is present in the Latin fathers and was the dominant understanding in the Eastern church. According to A. Edward Siecienski:

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[11] Caragounis, 117.
[12] Cargounis, 117.
[13] J. Van Engen, "Peter, Primacy of" in Daniel J. Treier, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 658.

> The second approach, closely linked to the first [the typological interpretation], is what Luz called the "Eastern interpretation" although the name is misleading for several reasons. First, the idea that the "rock" was Peter's confession of faith, not Peter himself, is not exclusively Eastern, and can also be seen in the works of many of the Latin fathers. . . . All that being said, the belief that the Church was built on the proper confession of Jesus as the Christ did predominate in the East, especially in the fourth and fifth centuries when Christological heresies seemed to challenge, in one form or another, the correct profession of that faith.[14]

3. The Gates

After declaring in v. 18 that he will build his church on the rock, the truth of his identity that Peter just confessed, Jesus says, "and the gates of Hades will not be able to defeat it." The pronoun "it" (*autēs*) is feminine singular, but so are both "rock" (*petra*) and "church" (*ekklēsian*), so grammatically *autēs* could refer to either. In other words, from a grammatical standpoint, Jesus could be saying that the gates of Hades will not be able to defeat *him*, the subject of Peter's confession, or will not be able to defeat *his church*, which he will build on the foundation of that confession. But the fact "church" is nearer to the pronoun makes it the more natural reference.[15]

Hades (*hadēs*) is the abode of the spirits of the dead.[16] It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Sheol (*šĕʾôl*).[17] Allen Clayton says of Hades:

> Abode or state of the dead prior to their eternal disposition at the last judgment. Although Hades is translated as "hell" in some English versions of the Bible, "hell" more properly translates *gehenna*, the true hell of everlasting punishment. Hades was originally the name of the Greek god of the underworld. Hellenistic Judaism, however, appropriated the term as the equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol*, realm of the dead.[18]

The phrase "gates of Hades" (*pulai hadou*) in v. 18 depicts that abode as a fortified city with gates, through which the dead enter and by which they are retained.[19] Thus, the Judeans

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[14] A. Edward Siecienski, *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 118.

[15] "αὐτῆς, 'it,' has as its antecedent not πέτρα, 'rock,' but more naturally the nearer antecedent ἐκκλησίαν, 'church.'" Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 472; see also, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1991), 2:632; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 625 (fn. 34).

[16] Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 19; Franco Montanari, ed., *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 29; Joachim Jeremias, "ᾅδης" in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:148.

[17] "Hades is the Greek equivalent of the Old Testament Sheol. In the Old Testament, human existence does not end with death. Rather, a person continues to exist in the netherworld." George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 194.

[18] Allen L. Clayton, "Hades" in Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 503.

[19] "Entering the gates of Hades as a metaphor for the experience of death begins in classical writers with Homer who describes dying as passing the gates of Hades." Jack P. Lewis, "'The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail Against It'

who were on the brink of execution are spoken of in 3 Macc. 5:51 as being at "the gates of Hades." Hezekiah reports in Isa. 38:10 (LXX) that in his dire condition before his rescue by God he lamented that at the height of his days he would leave his remaining years in the "gates of Hades." In Wisdom of Solomon 16:13, God's power over life and death is highlighted by his leading down to "the gates of Hades" and bringing back up. In Job 38:17 (LXX), God asks Job (NETS) "do the *gates of death* [*thanatos*] open to you out of fear, and did the *porters of Hades* cower when they saw you?" Psalm 9:14 and 106:18 (LXX) likewise speak of the "gates of death" [*thanatos*].

The departed spirits who inhabit Sheol are referred to in the Old Testament as Rephaim (*rĕpāʾîm* – Job 26:5; Ps. 88:11; Prov. 2:18, 9:18, 21:16; Isa. 14:9, 26:14, 19).[20] They are depicted as "the weak, shadowy continuations of the living who have now lost their vitality and strength."[21] They are "lifeless and flaccid."[22] "They must be roused to greet a newcomer, and then they note that he has become weak like them (Is. 14:9f)."[23] Though the word Rephaim is not used in the verse, those who go down to Sheol are said in Ezek. 32:21 to "lie still." They are only a shadow or reflection of the full persons they were on earth. Hence, Rephaim often is translated "shades" in English versions.

One of the main understandings of Hades among Jews of Jesus' day was "that all souls, both just and unjust, went to Hades but were separated into different locations in the underworld. The righteous went to a place of consolation; the unrighteous were tormented elsewhere."[24] That understanding is confirmed in the New Testament. It reveals that Jesus went to "paradise" on the day of his death (Lk. 23:43) but did not go to heaven, as shown by his post-resurrection statement to Mary that he had "not yet ascended to the Father," who is in heaven (Jn. 20:17). Rather, Jesus went to Hades, as indicated by Acts 2:31, which says David spoke prophetically of the resurrection of Christ, that he was not "*abandoned to* Hades," meaning that by the resurrection Jesus was not *allowed to remain* in Hades.[25] So the paradise to which Jesus went at his death was Hades or a part of Hades. That it was a distinctive part of Hades, as thought by many Jews, is indicated by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Lk. 16:19-31. The realm of the dead is depicted there as having two compartments, a place of consolation and a place of torment. Abraham and Lazarus were in the former, for which the label "paradise" is fitting, and the ungodly rich man was in the latter, which some refer to as "Tartarus" based on 2 Pet. 2:4 (referring to sinful angels).

(Matt 16:18): A Study Of The History Of Interpretation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38:3 (Sept. 1995), 349.

[20] The word is defined in Michael L. Brown, "רָפָאִים" in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1173, as "shades, departed spirits, inhabitants of the netherworld."

[21] R. F. Schnell, "Rephaim" in George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 4:35.

[22] Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 128.

[23] Johnston, 128.

[24] Clayton, 503.

[25] See, BDAG, 273. See also, Rom. 10:6-7, which refers to Christ being in "the abyss" in death. In the LXX of Ps. 71:20 "abyss" refers to the depths of the earth as the abode of the dead, meaning *Sheol*. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 2:525.

It is also revealed in the New Testament that Christians go to heaven when they die, meaning their spirit goes to the dimension or sphere of God's unique presence (see, e.g., Acts 7:56-59; Phil. 1:21-23; Rev. 6:9). This suggests that Jesus' resurrection and ascension removed whatever divider existed between heaven and paradise, the consoling compartment of Hades, so that paradise has now been absorbed into heaven. It has been annexed by heaven, so to speak, the result of which is that the righteous dead now enjoy heavenly communion with the Lord immediately upon death. This fits nicely with the fact Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2-4 refers to heaven (the third heaven, the abode of God) as "paradise," the same word in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.[26] The "annexation" removed the distinction between heaven and paradise. Hades remains but only as the abode of the damned, the holding pen of those who at the final judgment will be consigned eternally to hell (*geenna*).

The verb of which "gates of Hades" is the subject is *katischuō*. It means "to have the capability to defeat, win a victory over."[27] "The purpose of the gates of Hades was to prevent its inhabitants from escaping and reentering the realm of the living,"[28] so those gates symbolize the power of Hades potentially to defeat Christ's church by keeping Christians who die locked in a shadowy disembodied existence away from the immediate presence of God and blocked from resurrection. Whatever concern his disciples may have had about that possibility, Jesus declares unequivocally that Hades will not be able to win that or any other victory over the church.

Jesus does not explain why the gates of Hades will have no such power over Christians; he simply asserts it as a fact. Of course, God is able to rescue anyone from Hades, to bring them from that realm to resurrection life, as he did with Jesus, but that will not be necessary in the case of Christians because, as noted, they do not go to Hades upon death. Rather, by Christ's work, the spirits of deceased saints go directly to heaven where they await the resurrection in the immediate presence of God, an intermediate state that is far better than existence in a mortal body in this fallen, sin-sick world (Phil. 1:23).[29] So however fearsome the gates of Hades were thought to be, they will be rendered irrelevant for the church.

4. The Keys

Jesus says in v. 19, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven." Since the keys he promises to give relate to the "kingdom of heaven," it is

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[26] "Paradise" in 2 Cor. 12:4 is the same word used in Lk. 23:43 (*paradeisos*) to describe the blessed, post-death state to which Jesus and the thief were going. The only other time this word appears in the Greek NT is in Rev. 2:7, which speaks of the tree of life "in the paradise of God."

[27] BDAG, 534. Against the claim that the verb "most naturally connotes an advancing force" and that "gates of Hades" therefore stands for attacking powers of the underworld, Charles L. Quarles states in *Matthew*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 416 (fn. 470), "the uses of the verb in the LXX demonstrate that the verb does not imply whether the subject is the aggressor or defender. It merely identifies the one who wins out in the end."

[28] Quarles, 416.

[29] As blessed as the intermediate state is for Christians, an even greater existence for humans, those created as embodied spirits, is eternal life in the immediate presence of God in transformed *bodies* that are suited for the eternal state, bodies that have been made glorious, powerful, imperishable, and immortal (1 Cor. 15:35-54). That is why, despite the superiority of the intermediate state to present earthly life, Paul longs to be clothed with a resurrection body (2 Cor. 5:1-4).

necessary to understand what is meant by that phrase to grasp the meaning of the statement. There is more to the "kingdom of heaven" than is often recognized.

The "kingdom of heaven" is equivalent to the phrase "kingdom of God" that is used elsewhere.[30] It refers to God's ultimate expression of his kingly rule on the world, to his manifesting that rule in such a way that all things are brought into harmony and conformity with his ultimate will and purpose. It is the divine utopia in which this broken world of rebellion, sin, hostility, and fragmentation finally is transformed by God into a perfect reality of love, joy, and fellowship with God and one another. As Robert Saucy explains:

> According to the Scriptures, there is a sense in which God has always ruled and is even now the King over all creation (1 Chron 29:11, 12: Ps 103:19; 145:13). But there is another thread of truth that views the kingdom as yet to come (Zech. 14:9; Mat. 6:10). It is this last theme that dominates the eschatological hope of Scripture. God is king over all his creative works, but his kingdom is not established on the earth in human history. While he rules over the affairs of the earth with nothing occurring apart from his permissive will, he has allowed sin and rebellion to enter history and Satan to have a certain dominance as the "god of this age" (2 Cor 4:4). God's rule might be said therefore to be *over* the earth, but not directly *on* the earth. It is the coming of God to establish this latter condition, to bring his kingdom to earth in the vindication of his sovereign holiness, that has constituted the hope of God's people throughout all time.[31]

In the first century, Israel was weak, poor, and under the rule of pagans (the Romans). The people longed and prayed for the coming of God, for his final intervention when he would set all things right and rule in the fullest sense to the blessing of his people. In Mk. 15:43 Joseph of Arimathea is described as one who was "waiting for" (NAS, NASU, NIV) or "waiting expectantly for" (NRSV) or "looking forward to" (HCSB, NET, CSB) the kingdom of God.

It was into that environment that Jesus came saying, "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk. 1:15) and "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mat. 12:28) and "for behold, the kingdom of God is among you [in your midst]" (Lk. 17:21b). He was announcing the arrival of the ultimate expression of God's kingly rule on the world. Matthew 4:23 states that Jesus "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, *preaching the good news of the kingdom*, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." Matthew 9:35 states, "And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and *proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom* and healing every disease and every affliction." Jesus says in Lk. 4:43, "I must preach the *good news of the kingdom of God* to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." Luke 8:1 says that Jesus went through cities and villages "proclaiming and bringing the *good news of the*

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[30] This is evident from the many sets of parallel passages in which "kingdom of heaven" is used in Matthew and "kingdom of God" is used in the other Gospels and from the use of both phrases in Mat. 19:23-24. The equivalence of the phrases is widely recognized among scholars. For example, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., conclude in *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1988), 1:392, "So 'kingdom of heaven' equals 'kingdom of God.' Both denote God's rule, present and coming."

[31] Robert L. Saucy, "The Eschatology of the Bible" in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 1:105.

kingdom of God." In Lk. 9:2 Jesus sent the twelve out "to *proclaim the kingdom of God* and to heal." In Lk. 9:60 he told a man he had called to follow him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and *proclaim the kingdom of God*."[32]

The "good news of the kingdom" was that the kingdom was at long last arriving in the person and ministry of Jesus. He was the "kingdom bringer," the one ushering in God's grand final work. David Wenham writes: "To sum up: in proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus was announcing the coming of God's revolution and of God's new world, as promised in the Old Testament. God was at last intervening, Jesus declared, to establish his reign over everything, to bring salvation to his people and renewal and reconciliation to the world."[33] That is why Jesus tells the disciples in Mat. 13:17, "For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

Most Jews expected the kingdom to come suddenly and decisively. They thought God's final intervention would be a one-shot deal – the Day of the Lord – where the old age would be terminated abruptly and the new, glorious age would begin.[34] This common expectation caused people to wonder how Jesus could be bringing the kingdom of God when the hallmarks of the old age – death, decay, sin, suffering, etc. – still were present. Even John the Baptist began to question as he sat in Herod's jail whether Jesus was in fact the one who would bring in the kingdom of God (Mat. 11:2-3; Lk. 7:18-19). Jesus explained in a number of parables and elsewhere that the kingdom comes in two stages. It is introduced or inaugurated, then there is an interval of time in which the kingdom and the old age coexist, and then there is a decisive intervention when the kingdom is consummated or finalized. So "[t]he kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching is both present and future."[35] As Davies and Allison put it, "When Jesus announces that the kingdom of God has come and is coming, this means that the last act has begun but not yet reached its climax: the last things have come and will come."[36] Preben Vang and Terry Carter state:

> According to Jesus, the kingdom of God is already here. Jesus inaugurated it! The "age to come" has broken into the "present age." God is making his presence felt already now. Yet the kingdom of God is not here in full. Evil still exists. God does not yet fill "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). This will only happen at the time of consummation when Christ comes back. We now live between the times. The promised "age to come" has already begun but is not here in full. The "old age" is still here as well.[37]

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[32] "Modern scholarship is quite unanimous in the opinion that the Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus." Ladd, 54. Arland Hultgren says that "[v]irtually all scholars would agree" that "[t]he kingdom was certainly a main theme, even *the* main theme, of Jesus' message." Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 384.

[33] David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 25.

[34] See, e.g., Wenham, 62-63; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 462-465.

[35] Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 54. David L. Turner says in *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 43, that "nearly all contemporary NT scholars agree" that the kingdom "is both present and future."

[36] Davies and Allison, 1:390.

[37] Preben Vang and Terry Carter, *Telling God's Story: The Biblical Narrative from Beginning to End* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 199.

The inauguration of the kingdom involved a complex of events that are viewed as a single unit. The kingdom was ushered in through the life and ministry of Christ; his death, resurrection, and ascension; and the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. That is why Jesus could say before the cross and before Pentecost that the kingdom "has come upon you" (Mat. 12:28) and "the kingdom of God is among you [in your midst]" (Lk. 17:21b). The process of inauguration was underway, a process that would run through the events of Pentecost.

It is at Christ's return that the redemption he began nearly 2,000 years ago will come to completion. That is the time when in Rev. 11:15 the heavenly voices say, "The kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." And that is the time when in Rev. 11:17 the twenty-four elders say, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power *and begun* to reign." At Christ's return, the kingdom he inaugurated with his first coming will be consummated or finalized. That will be the time of the new heaven and new earth, when God will dwell with man in a redeemed or "heavenized" creation in which there will be no death or mourning or crying or pain, for the "old order of things" (NIV) will have passed away (Rev. 21:1-4).

Keys are for opening locked gates or doors and thus giving to Peter ("you" [*soi*] is singular) the keys of the kingdom of heaven signifies giving to him the means and responsibility to open the kingdom for others to enter.[38] Nolland states, "The present keys imagery has as its starting point the need for the gates of the kingdom of heaven to be opened if people are to find entry. . . . Peter has the keys in order to be able to let people into the kingdom of heaven."[39] Michael Wilkins concurs: "Peter is given the authority to admit entrance to the kingdom of heaven."[40] He is to be the antithesis of the scribes and Pharisees who shut the kingdom of heaven in front of people (Mat. 23:13). As for whether the keys relate to the present or future manifestations of the kingdom, Nolland notes that there is no need to choose between the two because "engagement with the kingdom as present will be the prelude for entry into the kingdom as future."[41] The emphasis here seems to be on the inaugurated kingdom.

Since the keys of the kingdom of heaven represent that which provides access to the kingdom, and access to the kingdom is provided through preaching of the gospel, giving to Peter the keys of the kingdom represents entrusting to him in some distinctive way the preaching of the gospel. Nolland says, "Peter's possession of the keys primarily involves him in pointing to Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God and relaying what he has learned from him."[42] Wilkins states, "Peter's mission is to give people access to the kingdom, and this mission involves especially his

[38] The plural "keys" (*kleidas*) perhaps suggests multiple gates as an expression of grandeur.
[39] Nolland, 676. He rejects (p. 677) attempts to associate these keys with "the key of the house of David" in Isa. 22:22, with keys of the temple or sanctuary, with keys of Death and Hades in Rev. 1:18, or with the key of the bottomless pit in Rev. 9:1 and 20:1.
[40] Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 566.
[41] Nolland, 676.
[42] Nolland, 677.

preaching of the gospel."[43] Dietrich Müller and Colin Brown note that Peter "has a mission to carry out by his preaching to give men access to the kingdom."[44]

Peter was entrusted with the preaching of the gospel in the distinctive sense of having the privilege and responsibility of being the first to unleash it on the world, as reported in Acts 2:14-40. There Peter opens the kingdom of heaven, gives humanity access to it, by proclaiming the truth about Jesus' identity, death, resurrection, and ascension and the need to accept that truth and respond to it in repentance and submission to baptism. Because God will never revoke the promise announced by Peter, the fact entrance into the kingdom is for all who accept the gospel (Acts 2:39), Peter's opening of the gates stands in perpetuity.[45] Wilkins remarks, "Peter alone receives the keys because once the door to the kingdom of heaven is unlocked, there is no more need for keys."[46] All who follow him in preaching the same message are inviting others to enter through gates that he, on the basis of Christ's work, was given the honor of opening by priority in preaching.

Jesus adds in v. 19b, "and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven." He thus assures Peter of the heavenly weight that his opening the gates of the kingdom by preaching the gospel will carry, an encouragement that applies by implication to all who later invite others to enter through those open gates by preaching the same gospel.[47] By opening the gates in a gospel configuration, a way that permits entrance to all who accept the message of Christ and none who reject it, Peter will divide his audience into two groups: those who accept and those who reject the gospel. The former will be released from their sins by Christ's atoning work; the latter will be bound to their sins by their rejection of the only means of forgiveness. As Wilkins states, "People who receive the gospel are loosed from their sins so that they can enter the open door to the kingdom. People who reject the gospel message are bound in their sins, which will prevent them from entering the kingdom."[48]

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[43] Wilkins, 566.
[44] Dietrich Müller and Colin Brown, "κλείς" in Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2:732.
[45] As was later clarified, the truth Peter preached at Pentecost opened the gates for all, Jews, Samaritans (Acts 8:1-17), and Gentiles (Acts 10).
[46] Wilkins, 568.
[47] The local church is involved in "binding and loosing" in the context of disfellowshipping (Mat. 18:18).
[48] Wilkins, 568.