

THE EVOLUTION OF ST. PETER'S KEYS

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IN 1918 Prof. A. Harnack published a dissertation in the reports of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, which has found little publicity on account of the war and the revolutions following it. It treated of the words: "Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will found my Church; and I will give thee the keys of heaven," which words are to be seen in large, conspicuous lettering on the inner walls of St. Peter's dome in Rome.

These words occur in Matt. xvi. 18-19, the only gospel that has them. In connection with them, the other words occur: "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Harnack says: "Hades does not mean anything else but the abode of death. Hades and death are already parallels in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In no wise whatever does Hades mean the infernal powers of the devil." For hell, as commonly understood, the gospels have another term in the original Gehenna." All Christian writers before Eusebius of Caesarea (270-340 A. D.) interpret Hades in this passage as meaning that Peter shall not see death before the coming of the Messianic reign. Likewise the Pagan writer, Porphyry and another, cited by Macarius Magnus, a Christian writer, who died 390 A. D. Also Jerome (345-420), the great upholder of Roman orthodoxy, secretary of pope Damasus and another of the Vulgate, the acknowledged Bible version of the Roman Church, knows this interpretation, although not sharing it himself. This interpretation is further confirmed by the last verse of the chapter, in which the words occur: "Verily I say unto you, there are some of those standing here who shall not taste death, till they see the son of man coming in his kingdom." As well known, it was the opinion of Jesus, as well as of whole primitive Christianity that the end of the world was very near.

The gospels (Mark xiii. 30; Matth. xxiv. 34; Luke xxi. 32) attribute the words to Jesus: "This generation, i. e., the one living at his time, shall not pass away, before the coming of the son of man." Nothing whatever is therefore promised to the Church, but to Peter, that is, that he shall not see death before that great event. This is also confirmed by the fact that some ancient readings have: "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against thee," i. e., Peter, not "it." i. e., "the Church."

Regarding the words: "Upon this rock I will found my Church" Harnack says that all Christian writers, till up to Origen (died 254) know nothing of the founding of the Church upon Peter. This is not quite an exact statement, in so far as that Terbullian (died 220), who gives the Matthew passage for the first time in full, refers it to the founding of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, as related in Acts II. by saying in his work *On modesty*, in chapter xxi.: "Peter was the first to unbar in Christian baptism the entrance to the heavenly kingdom, in which are loosed the sins, that were before-time bound, and those, which have not been loosed, are bound." Because of the peculiarity involved in the words that Hades (death) shall not prevail against the Church, and that this is the only passage, in which Jesus speaks of his believers as his Church, Harnack assumes that they are an interpolation brought into the text at Rome, because the Roman Church has always tenaciously stuck to the prerogative, which Peter is said to have possessed, and that this happened about the times of emperor Hadrian 117-138.

But Harnack was not the first one, who takes this passage as an interpolation. Already before him Keim, II. Holtzmann, O. Pfeiderer, Wernle and Merx had doubted its historicity. In 1904 J. Grill, professor at Tuebingen published *The Primacy of Peter*, in which he came to the conclusion that they was an insertion made in Rome about 190, in order to legitimize the Roman bishop scripturally as the rock, which is destined to secure the whole body of Christian believers in their possession of truth and salvation against heresy and abuse.

In 1910 the Roman Catholic professor of Theology, J. Schuitzer, at Munich published: *Has Jesus Founded the Papacy?* He argues: The coming of the Messianic kingdom in the near future was a predominating thought in the ideas of Jesus and his followers. Why then a Church, a papacy? Matthew is dependent upon Mark, now generally considered the oldest gospel, and the corrections in Matthew represent dogmatic gradations beyond Mark, which must be

doubled very much. Since Mark viii. 27, reports the Messianic confession of Peter, but knows nothing neither of the beatifying extolment of the same, nor reports the least of his elevation to a rock of foundation and a keeper of the keys of heaven, the words in Matthew must be considered incredible and suspected as a later insertion. The oldest of the Christian writers outside of the New Testament know nothing of a superior power of Peter. Further a monarchic episcopate can first be traced in Rome from the middle of the second century on. Irenaeus (died 220), who very strongly accentuates the precedence of the Roman church, sees in Peter and Paul the founders of the Roman church, but he knows nothing of Peter as the rock and keeper of the keys. The first trace of the words occurs in the dialogue of Justin Martyr with the Jew Trypho (written about 155), but it says nothing of Peter the rock and keeper of keys. Bishop Callistus of Rome (217-222) is the first one, who refers the words to Peter, as being the rock, and his power of loosing and binding to himself, and lays claim to it. Closing, Schuitzer says: Jesus has never spoken the words. They form the beginning of the falsifications, by which the claims of the popes of the Middle ages, gradually growing more and more, were to be sanctioned. Schuitzer got into trouble with the Roman see on account of his investigations and was excommunicated. He then entered the philosophical department of the University of Munich as professor of Church history and history of religion.

The conclusions of the investigators of the passage, that the words are not historic, will very probably be accepted by all unbiased as correct. There is also no doubt that the Roman episcopacy used the passage to its advantage. But whether the passage is a conscious interpolation made directly and especially by the Roman episcopate alone, to confirm its claims is doubtful. In general, the evolution of an idea travels a very tortuous and complicated way before it becomes fixed. Upon this way an interpretation of the terms, "keys of heaven," "binding and loosing" in the passage of Matthew, offered by W. Koehler, in Vol. VIII of *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, throws light, which I here make use of with my own additions. Hitherto no fully satisfactory explanation of those singular terms in the Matthew passage, pointing to a mediatorship of the Church, in order to get into the kingdom of heaven, has been given. This idea of a mediatorship of the Church seems to have been developed, in consequence of the fact that the imminent coming of the Messianic kingdom on earth, which Jesus and primitive

Christianity expected, did not become true, and that for that reason the kingdom of God was again placed in the beyond to come into which, the regulations of the Church as a means of salvation were developed.

Now it is a fact that already the older Pagan religions of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks, did not only use the terms "keys and gates of Heaven and Hades," in a physical and cosmological, but also in a spiritual and moral sense, the latter being done especially in those Pagan cults which we call "mysteries," and which by their doctrines offered a means of salvation from the world of sense and evils to the initiated, such as the Orphic cults among the Greeks, and then especially Mithraism, the great competitor of Christianity. Helios has the keys to the gates of heaven, Pluto to those of Hades, Kronos in Mithraism has the keys to both, being represented with two keys in his statues. Likewise is the term "key-holder" applied to the priests and priestesses of the gods, among the ancient Greeks. The key is the standing symbol of priestesses in pictorial representations of them and on their graves. The Greek goddess, Dike (justice), is said to have the keys of heaven. This can be traced back centuries before the Christian era in the language of religious Greek cults. The old king Kelcos of Eleusis, where the noted religious festival of the mysteries was held, had a daughter, Kleisidike, i. e., Dike with the keys. The goddess Dike herself, sits in heaven near the throne of Zeus, looks down upon the mortals and only opens the gates of heaven to the worthy. The Mithraic Kronos, who had an especial place in the sanctuaries of the Mithra-worshippers, has the keys of heaven, to open and close its doors in order to let the souls descend and ascend. This idea already occurs before in Plato, who often quotes Orphic writings, dealing with the purification and ultimate immortality of the soul. According to him, the soul on earth, feeling itself as imprisoned in the body, is swayed by a desire to return to its original home, from which it has descended. According to the old Greek philosopher, Parmenides, truth lies behind the doors of heaven, and according to Chaldean-Persian theories, the world of the Gods is closed by fiery portals, which only open to the wise and pure. But the desire of salvation conquers the barriers. The soul reascends to heaven step by step, after many conflicts, which demons and spirits of darkness prepare for it, after having descended to earth through the doors of heaven. Just as Plutarch, though a Pagan, taught that there are good and bad demons, the former reaching out their hand

to the soul, drawing it upwards, supporting and strengthening it, when weak, while the latter oppose the soul and bear in themselves all the animal traits of mythology, which are responsible for the evils of the world. According to Babylonian-Persian ideas, there are seven doors to pass for the soul, each guarded by an archon, i. e., ruler. Woe to the soul if it does not know the password and magic formula. And in an Egyptian representation of the progress of the soul it reads: "Proudly the soul enters the door of heaven, received by the blessed, to remain with the Sun-god Atum and the stars in everlasting glory."

All such ideas appear again in one or the other way in the Gnostic writings, that host of the strangest mixture of Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Jewish and Christian speculations regarding creation, and the salvation of the soul, which sprang up with the coming of Christianity. They teach that the souls are bound in the bodies, and that if they wish to enter "the doors of light and life," they must be loosed from matter. That Christ brings the mystery, which looses the souls, and that when he leaves heaven to descend to earth, the guards at the doors of heaven, the archons, are "bound" and their "bonds" "loose" themselves: he needs no doorkeeper, the bonds of the doors open automatically. The terms "bind" and "loose" are only an amplification of the term "keys of heaven," and in the last end probably originally taken from the language of magic. The idea that powers or properties of man, or of the animal world, or of nature, or spirits, or even of Gods, can be bound by a magical knot, with accompanying conjuring formulas and unloosed, we find spread all over primitive humanity. We find such words as these in ancient magic papyri, "May every bond be loosed," or that the god conjured to open a door is described as loosing all bonds, or a magic stone as opening doors and breaking all bonds.

While, according to some Gnostic writings, Christ leaves the doors of heaven unhindered, according to them the archons have the power, as guards at the doors, to bind and loose souls. In consequence of these Gnostic views, Koehler gives from some of their writings, the Pistis Sophia and others, the following words, which would explain the terms of Matthew: "Therefore I have brought the keys of the mysteries into the world, to loose the sinner, who believe and obey me, in order that he, whom I have loosed in the world from the bonds and seals of the Aeons, i. e., cosmic rulers, and archons, may be loosed above from the bonds and seals of the archons; and in order that he, whom I have bound in the world

within the seals and vestures and orders of light, shall be bound in the land of light in the orders of the heritage of light." The Matthew passage has developed under the tension of Christianity over against the ancient religions, with their different mystical cults, also teaching and promising a way of salvation, especially over against Mithraism. The Church further also wished to shake off Gnosticism, that mixture of all kinds of older religious speculations and Christianity. It therefore put forth its own heavenly doorkeeper in Peter, whom, as it claimed, Christ himself had appointed, in contrast to the priests and representatives of other modes of salvation. But it did this in the mystical language of the older cults and Gnosticism, just as in many other ways it adapted itself to Pagan customs, for instance in decreeing the birthday of the Savior as being at the time of the winter-solstice, the rebirth of the Sun-god, or when later introducing holy water and incense into the churches, following the precedent of Pagan temple-service, etc., etc.

In the above quoted words of the Gnostic writing we then have an essentially authentic interpretation of the Matthew passage. The kernel is originally: What is bound or loosed here on earth, that prevails in heaven, and cannot be contested any more by hostile powers, even not in heaven. This authority makes Peter the doorkeeper of heaven, for through it he has the power to open heaven or to close it. And if we ask, wherein loosing and binding consists, we are led to the mysteries, perhaps especially baptism. Through it, the bonds, which demons had thrown about man, were loosed, in it one was bound in Christianity and had the master key to heaven, exactly as in the liturgy of Mithraism, heaven is opened to the initiated. As we have seen above, Terbullian had about the same view. To make its mysteries, especially baptism, capable of competition with the mysteries of the ancient world, Christianity has taken in the dress of antiquity. By this we understand how already the Church of the second century could confine the power of binding and loosing to the forgiving of sins in a juridical, church-governmental sense, to the authority, to loose excommunication, i. e., revoke it, or to bind, i. e., let it continue. This step was taken, after the Church had overcome the Gnostic crisis, and was then in no need any more of the dress of antiquity. It was not the only case of churchifying scripture.

In closing, we will touch on some interesting facts, which followed the idea of Peter having the keys, in spite of the churchifying of terms, which were originally taken from Paganism and magic.

The church could not completely wipe out the traces of the antique origin of the terms of the Matthew passage. In many folk songs of Europe, Peter has retrograded again into the weather maker, like the ancient-nature gods, Janus, the god of seasons, and Saburn, the old Italian god of agriculture, etc. The ferry money, which is given in the old Greek myth to Charon in Hades for transporting the departed souls over the Coccythus, is transformed into money given to Peter by the deceased, into whose coffin it is even laid nowadays still in some places. The binding and loosing power of Peter lived on in the antique sense that the keys are magic keys. In folk rhymes Peter is called to close the mouths of wolves and dogs with his keys. And in Norway many conjuring formulas begin: "I borrowed the heavenly key to find, may it be dwarfs and other trouble makers."

One more point. It is well known that ancient pictorial and sculptural representations of gods and mythological personalities have influenced Christian art. Christ as the good shepherd was represented in early Christian art in the form of the shepherd-god Hermes, and the halo, placed about the heads of the gods and deified persons, in ancient art, was placed about the head of Christ and the saints. Some therefore see in the representation of Peter in Christian art a resemblance to the ancient Italian god Janus and the Mithraic Kronos. These two gods, probably both confounded together, carry key and staff. Peter is the only one of the twelve apostles, who beside the keys is represented with a staff. The figure of the cock represented with the Mithraic Kronos, and the legend that Mithras was rock-begotten, may also have influenced the evolution of the key-bearership of Peter. But we guard against the supposition that Peter was therefore mythological as Mithras, for the historicity of Peter is too well established by the earliest writings of Christianity, the letters of Paul to the Galatians and the first one to the Corinthians. We can only say that mythological traits were transferred to Peter, to make him more acceptable to minds, which had been nurtured by myths for centuries. On the other hand, we may mention the curious fact that in nominal Christian countries ancient mythical personalities have become Christian saints, as if they were historical. In lower Italy even Venus became a Santa Venere.