

Peter and the Keys



When Jesus said He would give the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter what did that mean to Jewish ears? In the Jewish Holy Book the Talmud there is an account of what happened when the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians 500 years before Christ



“The rabbis taught: When the First Temple was destroyed, groups of young priests gathered, holding the keys of the Temple in their hands, and ascended to the Temple roof. They declared: Lord of the universe! As we have failed in our duty as guardians, we return the keys to You! And they threw them up and the Palm of a Hand issued forth and received them.” *Talmud Ninth Tractate Ta’anit*

For Jews the keys of the Temple were symbols of sacredness for the keys were entrusted to them by God. When the apostles heard Jesus saying He would give Peter the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” they would have known that something significant was happening.



In salvation history the apostles would have been aware of the plan of God.

The first covenant was with Adam and Eve (a holy couple), then with Noah (a holy family), then with Abraham (a holy tribe) then with Moses (a holy nation) then with David (a holy kingdom). Finally, with Jesus Christ, God establishes a covenant relationship with His Church meant to include all people, in all places, at all times. This is the everlasting covenant, the kingdom of heaven and Peter is given the keys to govern this kingdom, the Church on earth.

This passage in Matthew 16:15-19 shows Christ establishing His New Kingdom the Church.

Jesus said to them, “But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jonah! Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. I will give **you the keys to 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”

Peter identifies Jesus as the “Christ” (Greek for Messiah) the long awaited King of Israel. When the apostles heard Jesus, the King of Israel, give Peter the keys to His kingdom they would have known that Peter was being appointed prime minister of the Kingdom as was Eliakim.

The prophet Isaiah 700 years before Christ



“In that day I will call my servant Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your girdle on him, and will commit your authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder **the key** of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. And I will fasten him like a sure peg in a sure place and he will become a throne of honor to his father’s house.” Isaiah 22:20-23



“The king was ruler of his kingdom and he had his right hand man, a prime minister, next in command. The one who held this authoritarian role was given the keys of the kingdom by the king. The Apostles of Christ would have immediately connected Jesus, the King of the New Kingdom, giving another man, the prime minister "keys".

This passing on of authority is symbolized by the key of the house of David. Eliakim will be over the house of David: he shall open and none shall shut; he shall shut and none shall open. In Matt 18:19, Peter, and Peter alone, is given the keys. Peter, and Peter alone, is tapped, by God, as the prime minister of this new kingdom, which is the Church. Whatever Peter binds (shuts) on earth shall be bound in Heaven and whatever he looses (opens) on earth shall be loosed in Heaven. This is an incredible statement that Jesus makes. Heaven will ratify Peter’s binding and loosing decisions. But in order for this to be true, Peter must be prevented from teaching error, for God cannot lie.

Protestant Objection: The book of Revelation says that Jesus holds the key. It even refers to the passage in Isaiah.

Revelation 3:7 “The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens.”

Catholic Answer: Although Jesus is called the "holder of the key of David" in Revelation 3:7, he doesn't hold it as Eliakim did. As the son of David, Jesus is the heir to the throne of his ancestor (see Luke 1:32-33). He truly is the king, not the master of the king's palace, as was Eliakim. As king, Jesus is free to bestow the keys of his kingdom on whomever he wishes--without losing the authority those keys represent. They are Jesus' keys. But what does Jesus do with the keys? *He gives them to Peter*

Protestant Objection: All the apostles were given the authority to “bind and to loose” in Matthew 18:18. There is nothing special about Peter.

Catholic Answer: While all the apostles were given the collective authority to “bind and to loose” that is the authority to make discipline, to excommunicate, to legislate, to forgive sin, Jesus gives Peter the singular authority to bind and loose and only Peter was given the keys. In order for there to be unity in the Church, the apostles will have to be united to Peter when they bind and loose as bishops of the Church.

In Luke 22:31 Jesus prays ONLY for Peter so that his faith would not fail:

“Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you (**plural in the Greek**) but I have prayed for **you** (**singular in the Greek**) that your faith may not fail and when you have turned again strengthen your brothers.”

Next topic: The Primacy of Peter in Scripture