

Binding and Loosing in their 1st Century Jewish Context

Matt 16:17-19 NIV 17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven

Matt 18:15-20 NIV 15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

*from Dr. David Stern in Jewish New Testament Commentary (see Acts 15:19-29 & Col 2:16-17)

18–20 Contrary to most Christian interpreters, I take the *p'shat* ("plain sense") of this passage to be dealing with making legal judgments and *halakhah*, not prayer.

The words rendered "prohibit" and "permit" (v. 18) are, literally, "bind" and "loose." These terms were used in first century Judaism to mean "prohibit" and "permit," as is clear from the article, "Binding and Loosing," in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 3:215:

"Binding and loosing (Hebrew *asar ve-hittir*) ... Rabbinical term for 'forbidding and permitting.' ...

"The power of binding and loosing was always claimed by the Pharisees. Under Queen Alexandra the Pharisees, says Josephus (*Wars of the Jews* 1:5:2), 'became the administrators of all public affairs so as to be empowered to banish and readmit whom they pleased, as well as to loose and to bind.' ... The various schools had the power 'to bind and to loose'; that is, to forbid and to permit (Talmud: Chagigah 3b).

"In this sense Jesus, when appointing his disciples to be his successors, used the familiar formula (Matt 16:19, 18:18). By these words he virtually invested them with the same authority as that which he found belonging to the scribes and Pharisees who 'bind heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but will not move them with one of their fingers'; that is, 'loose them,' as they have the power to do (Matt 23:2–4). In the same sense in the second epistle of Clement to James II ('Clementine Homilies,' Introduction), Peter is represented as having appointed Clement as his successor, saying: 'I communicate to him the power of binding and loosing so that, with respect to everything which he shall ordain in the earth, it shall be decreed in the heavens; for he shall bind what ought to be bound and loose what ought to be loosed as knowing the rule of the church.' "

The article notes that a very different, non-Jewish interpretation, equating binding and loosing with remitting and retaining sins (Yn 20:23), was adopted by Tertullian and all the church fathers, thus investing the head of the Christian Church with the power to forgive sins, referred to on the basis of Mt 16:18 as the "key power of the Church." Needless to say, I reject this later understanding which bears no relationship to the Jewish context.

The usual Christian view of vv. 19–20 is that it defines a "Messianic *minyan*" not as the quorum of ten established by *halakhah* (Talmud, Sanhedrin 2b) for public synagogue prayers, but as **two or three** assembled in Yeshua's name, plus Yeshua himself, who is **there with them** (v. 20). The problem with this is that the passage is not about prayer—although it is not wrong to make a *midrash* on it which does apply to prayer (see below and 2:15N). Rather, Yeshua, speaking to **those who have authority to regulate Messianic communal life** (vv. 15–17),

commissions them to establish New Covenant *halakhah*, that is, to make authoritative decisions where there is a question about how Messianic life ought to be lived. In v. 19 Yeshua is teaching that when an issue is brought formally to a panel of two or three Messianic Community leaders, and they render a halakhic decision here on earth, they can be assured that the authority of God in heaven stands behind them. Compare the Mishna:

“Rabbi Chananyah ben-T’radyon said, ‘If two sit together and words of *Torah* pass between them, the *Sh·khinah* abides between them, as it is said, “Those who feared *Adonai* spoke together, and *Adonai* paid heed and listened, and a record was written before him for those who feared *Adonai* and thought on his name” (Malachi 3:16).’ ” (Avot 3:2)

Curiously, the following extract from the Talmud provides a Jewish setting for both my understanding and the traditional Christian one.

“How do you know that if ten people pray together the *Sh·khinah* [“manifested divine presence”] is there with them? Because it is said, ‘God stands in the congregation of God’ (Psalm 82:1a) [and a “congregation” must have a *minyan* of at least ten]. And how do you know that if three are sitting as a court of judges the *Sh·khinah* is there with them? Because it is said, ‘In the midst of judges he renders judgment’ (Psalm 82:1b [taking *elohim* to mean “judges”; compare Yn 10:34–36&N]).” (B’rakhot 6a)

Thus, according to vv. 18–20 Yeshua’s other *talmidim* join Kefa (16:19) in replacing “the Levitical *cohanim* and the judge who shall be in those days” (Deuteronomy 17:8–12) as the final earthly repository of halakhic authority. However, the new system was not established instantaneously; for later Yeshua could still advise the Jewish public to obey the *Torah*-teachers and *P·rushim* because they “sit in the seat of Moshe” (23:2–3&N). In fact, even today, two thousand years later, the new system has hardly been established at all—Messianic communal practice is far more *ad hoc* and makes far less use of received wisdom and established precedents than one might expect.

The following expansion of v. 19 further clarifies its meaning: “To repeat (Greek *kai*, “and, moreover”) [and fortify in other language what I have just said in v. 18], I tell you that if two of you [Messianic community leaders] agree on the answer to any halakhic question or matter of public order that people ask you about, then it [the halakhic decision you make] will be for them [the people who asked the question] as if it had come directly from my Father in heaven.” In v. 20 Yeshua strengthens this statement by promising his own presence and authority in such situations.

Nevertheless, one may regard the traditional Christian understanding of vv. 19–20 as a *drash* in which a prayer context is supplied (by allowable eisegesis, see 2:15N) in a homily reassuring believers that their prayers are “powerful and effective” (Ya 5:16&N).