

The problem faced and the Lukan intent in responding to it surfaces in a new guise in the later christological controversies within the ancient church. When in A.D. 428 Nestorius objected to the ascription to the Virgin Mary of the traditional title *theotokos* (God-bearer), he was opposed by Cyril of Alexandria (*Epistle 17*). The issue was the same as that faced by Luke. The intent of the *theotokos* language was not to glorify the mother of Jesus but to guarantee that the life of Jesus was from its inception due to God's act. There was no time after conception, it affirmed, when there was any chance for the human Jesus to perform in a meritorious way and thereby deserve a divine status. He was what he was (divine) from his conception by the Holy Spirit. The terminology of *theotokos*, therefore, aimed to defend the emphasis on divine grace in the life of Jesus and in those of his followers just as had the Lukan story of the miraculous conception of Jesus in the third Gospel.

The Lukan narrative of the miraculous conception says that salvation comes from God, not from creatures. From the Lukan point of view, there is no possibility of human beings perfecting themselves or their world in and of themselves. Salvation comes from God whose gracious initiative brings into being a new creation, Jesus, whose disciples are begotten in the same way, by grace alone, through the spirit.

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Matthew 16:13–20

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, but which has now grown quiet. Today, while differences remain, biblical scholars in both camps have been led by their common allegiance to historical methodology to an exegesis that is less apologetic and polemic, more open to the text itself.

The passage “divides” into three parts. (1) The question about Jesus' identity (a) first is raised and answered in terms of what “people in general” have to say about him (vs. 13–14) and (b) then is addressed to the disciples and elicits Peter's confession (vs. 15–16). (2) Jesus responds to Peter with (a) a blessing (v. 17), (b) a name-giving (v. 18), and (c) a commission (v. 19). (3) There is a closing charge to all the disciples “not to tell anyone” (v. 20).

Parts (1) and (3) are closely paralleled in Mark 8:27–30 and Luke 9:18–21. Part (2) has no counterpart in Mark and Luke; it consists of traditions emanating from an Aramaic-speaking community and adapted to this location by Matthew. The marks of Semitic origin are numerous: the macarism (beatitude) formulation, the transliterated Aramaic name, Bar-Jonah, and the expression “flesh and blood” (v. 17); the wordplay on “rock” which comes off better in Aramaic than in Greek (v. 18); the reference to “binding and loosing” and the parallel construction (v. 19).

Because Jesus has already been identified as Son of God (14:33), Peter’s confession does not play the significant part in Matthew’s story that it does in Mark’s; nevertheless, our passage must be considered in relation to the surrounding context. In 16:1–4, the request for a sign already raises the question of Jesus’ authority and identity. Matthew’s understanding of Jesus’ Sonship is set forth in 16:21–28.

(1) In its present form, the account in verses 13–16 appears to be a type of narrative which culminates in the identification of a divine figure or a messenger of God. In some stories such an identification is elicited by a second-person question, to which the answer is a statement of self-identification (first person). Thus, for example, to the question “Who are you?” the answer in Acts 9:5 is “I am Jesus” and in John 1:23, “I am a voice crying.” In Joseph and Asenath 14:7, the archangel Michael responds, “I am the chief authority of the Lord’s house,” in reply to Asenath.

In our story, the more familiar scheme is inverted and the question appears in the first person. Still, the question “Who am I (said to be)?” signals a forthcoming identification of great significance. It is helpful to recall in advance that there were more answers than one to this question in the early church. God’s deed in Christ did not match existing categories with exactitude; it required that familiar terms be redefined, that old titles be stretched to cover the transcendent meaning of the event.

(a) The disciples report that popular speculation has identified Jesus as a prophet—a title of important, if ambiguous, meaning. “Prophet” is applied to Jesus in a variety of senses in the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 13:57, 21:11; Luke 7:16; John 4:19, 6:14; Acts 3:22). Here, the most natural signification is that of the prophet whose coming is anticipated as an eschatological sign; this notion lies behind the idea of the return of Elijah and probably that of John the Baptist’s identification with him (Matt. 11:14). Jeremiah does not fit this meaning well, though passages like II Esdras 2:18 and II Maccabees 15:13–16 are suggestive. At any rate, to call Jesus a prophet is no mean attribution.

(b) Yet, it is not an acceptable answer, for the question is now directed specifically to the disciples, “Who do you (plural) say that I am?” Simon

Peter confesses, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

In neither Mark 8:29 nor Luke 9:20 does the Petrine confession include the title Son. Perhaps Matthew has united two early confessions. Certainly, the “Son of God” title as it was used by early Christians qualifies the difficult title “Messiah,” which was opaque to Gentiles and most easily understood of an “anointed” human figure by Jews. The goal of the story is reached in the identification of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. (The titles are given further definition in vs. 21–28.)

(2) Jesus’ response to Peter has a uniquely Matthean flavor.

(a) The blessing in verse 17 is an enthusiastic endorsement of the confession: It was “revealed by my Father who is in heaven” and did not come from “flesh and blood.” Verses 16–17 should be read in connection with Matthew 11:25–27, in which “Sonship” and “revelation” also are related; it is interesting that in the Greek of both 16:17 and 11:27, the object of the verb “reveal” is unspecified and must be supplied. (In Gal. 1:16, Paul speaks of his own reception of God’s “revelation of his son” independent of the influence of “flesh and blood.”)

Although Peter’s confession in Matthew is made in response to a question asked of all the disciples and is in some sense “representative,” Jesus’ response clearly makes him the preeminent paradigm of faith. As “Simon, son of Jonah” (surely a reminder of the revelatory “sign of Jonah” in 16:4), he is declared the blessed recipient of a revelation that can only come from God.

Yet, though Peter occupies the center of the stage, other passages in the Gospel moderate the exclusiveness of his position. The confession of Jesus as Son of God has been anticipated in 14:33 by the exclamation of the other disciples, “Truly, you are God’s Son!” Jesus’ words to Peter (vs. 17–19) have the pattern, “blessing, name-giving, commissioning”; Matthew appears to use the same pattern in the sayings directed to all the disciples in 5:11–16 (“Blessed are you [plural] . . . You are salt . . . You are light . . . Let your light shine”). The tension between Peter’s special status and his shared status pervades the Gospel.

It is not a question of whether Peter can be dislodged from the position of priority implied by verse 17. He cannot—not in Matthew’s book. The earliest appearance of disciples in Matthew begins, “Jesus . . . saw Simon called Peter” (4:18). Matthew’s list of the “twelve apostles” (10:2) opens, “First, Simon who is called Peter.” Yet Peter’s indisputably prestigious standing must be balanced by passages which accord similar status to the other disciples.

(b) “You are Rock, and on this Rock I will build my church” (v. 18). The Greek text has *Petros* for the first occurrence of “Rock” in this saying

and *petra* for the second, a circumstance which has led some Protestant exegetes to dispute Peter's identity with the foundation stone. However, in Aramaic the word in both occurrences would have been the same, *Kepha*. (The naming of Simon in John 1:42 makes clear that *Petros* translates *Kepha*.)

The "rock" metaphor is at home in Jewish circles. A rabbinic source could speak of Abraham as the rock on which God can build the world; in the Qumran literature, there are striking allusions to the rock on which the community is established. The immediate background of 16:18 is probably Isaiah 28:16 in which it is said that God lays "a foundation, . . . a tested stone" that can withstand the onslaught of Sheol. According to Isaiah 28:16*d*, a name is inscribed on the stone: "He who has faith shall not waver" (NEB). Peter, the prototypical believer, is the unwavering rock on which the church is built; and "the powers of death shall not prevail against [the church]." (Isa. 28:16 was used quite differently where the Septuagint translation required another understanding. In the LXX, v. 16*d* reads, "And he who believes *in him* shall not be ashamed," which of necessity became a christological testimony; see Rom. 9:33, I Pet. 2:6.)

Yet *is* Peter such a solid rock? Apart from this shining moment, we remember his weaknesses. So does Matthew, whose portrait of Peter is that of a flawed hero: sinking in the sea because he is a "person of little faith" (14:30–31), inappropriately proposing three booths on the Mount of Transfiguration (17:4), denying Jesus with a curse (26:69–75).

In immediate juxtaposition to the grand confession and the saying about the Rock, Matthew even lets stand a sad story of Peter's frailty. When Peter discovers that divine Sonship means humiliation and suffering, he explodes, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." Jesus' devastating response is, "Get behind me, Satan, you are a stumbling block" (16:22–23). So soon the Rock has become a Stone of stumbling. Of course, what the rebuke of Peter achieves is a forceful emphasis on the passion prediction (v. 21) as essential to the content of the titles "Christ" and "Son of God."

In spite of weaknesses and failures of faith, Peter is the Rock—heroic, but flawed. Perhaps it is only with blemishes that he can be the prototypical disciple, the reminder that there is recovery beyond failure, even the reminder that the final guarantee of the church's life is not the foundation at all but the One who says, "*I will build my church.*" (The word "church" occurs only here and at Matt. 18:17 in the Gospels, though it should be observed that the church is never far beneath the surface of the text, especially in this "ecclesiastical Gospel.") At the center of the church's existence are the promises, "Where two or three are gathered in my name,

there am I in the midst of them” (18:20) and “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (28:20).

(c) “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (v. 19). The authority to “bind and loose” is scribal and refers, on the one hand, to the authority to declare what is forbidden or permitted under the law or, on the other hand, to the authority to exclude from or readmit to the synagogue.

The ascription of the authority to “bind and loose” to Peter is matched by a similar attribution to the wider circle of disciples in 18:18. In chapter 18 the context is church discipline and, specifically, the treatment of a recalcitrant fellow believer who “refuses to listen to the church” and is therefore to be treated “as a Gentile and tax collector” (18:17); in that context, the exercise of the authority must mean taking the decision to expel from membership. (While the authority of expulsion resides with the wider circle of disciples in 18:15–18, the strong emphasis on repeated forgiveness in 18:21–22 is *addressed to Peter*.) In 16:19, it is more likely that “binding and loosing” has to do with declaring binding rules—a scribal function whose heavy responsibilities are to be seen in Matthew 5:19. Modern commentators may distinguish more sharply than Matthew between “making rules” and “expelling or admitting,” since the latter authority is implicit in the former. (The interpretation of this saying found in John 20:23 is probably a later development of the tradition.)

The construction of verse 19 requires that the promise of the “keys of the Kingdom” be interpreted in relation to the scribal authority conferred on Peter (and on the other disciples in 18:18). The best clue to understanding it is probably to be found in 23:13, where it is charged that “scribes and Pharisees . . . shut the kingdom of heaven” (contrast v. 3); in light of Matthew 13:16–28, teaching which fails to emphasize the deeper concerns of the law may be regarded as “closing” the kingdom to people (cf. 18:5–6).

(3) Jesus commands the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Christ. The prohibition agrees with Matthew’s sense of what is appropriate to the pre-Easter setting in which the confession is found. In verse 21, we meet the first passion prediction: Jesus will “be killed and on the third day be raised.” Until that climax is reached, a messianic title would be understood in relation to a human, earthly ruler. After the resurrection the full Christian meaning of saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” is possible. Then, the command can be, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (28:19).



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