

“THE GATES OF HELL SHALL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT” (MATT 16:18): A STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

JACK P. LEWIS*

After mentioning the building of his Church, Jesus stated to Peter (as translated in the KJV) that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18). The statement, found only in Matthew’s account of the gospel, has the crucial words *pylai hadou*, the negated verb *katischyein*, and the object pronoun *autēs* (whose antecedent is uncertain).

I. CLASSICAL USAGE

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 Hades¹ and who speaks of the behavior of certain men as more hateful to him than the gates of Hades.² Tartarus has gates of iron and a threshold of bronze.³ Plato writes of the propylea of the way to Pluto (god of the underworld) with iron bars and key,⁴ and a pseudonymous Orphic poem speaks of the unbroken gates of Hades.⁵ According to a late quotation (third century AD) Aristotle suggested that beans were like the gates of Hades.⁶

The gates of Hades as the experience of death are also used by Aeschylus,⁷ while Euripides describes a phantom from the gates of darkness (*skotou pylas*) where Hades dwells.⁸ He also has the dying person beholding the gates of death.⁹ Theocritus addressed Artemas as one who moves the adamant at the door of Hades.¹⁰

Roman writers reflect a related concept. Vergil has Aeneas see a castle with a triple wall in front of which is a huge gate and pillars of solid adamant that no might of man can uproot. Over it without sleeping Tisisphone

* Jack Lewis is professor of Bible at Harding Graduate School of Religion, 1000 Cherry Road, Memphis, TN 38117.

¹ Homer *Iliad* 5.646.

² Ibid. 9.312; Homer *Odyssey* 14.156.

³ Homer *Iliad* 8.15.

⁴ Plato *Axiochus* 371B.

⁵ Orphica *Argon Antica* 11.42.

⁶ Diognetus Laertius 8.34–35.

⁷ Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 1291.

⁸ Euripides *Hecuba* 1.

⁹ Euripides *Hippolytus* 1447.

¹⁰ Theocritus 2.33–34.

sits guard day and night.¹¹ Ovid describes closed doors of adamant before the accursed Place.¹² Propertius informs us that no prayers can open the gates of darkness once the dead have passed beneath the rule of hell (*infernās*) with ways barred with the adamant bars.¹³

A Greek magical papyrus from the third or fourth century AD addresses Kore as one who has parted gates of unbreakable steel.¹⁴

In all of these cases gates are means of entry and exit. In none of them do they equal militant powers.¹⁵

Pylē occurs in nine NT passages, but the only other case in Matthew is in the admonition to "enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate" (Matt 7:13–14), a statement that is paralleled in Luke 13:24 but where *thyra* rather than *pylē* is used. Other occurrences allude to gates of cities or temples (7:12; Acts 3:10; 9:24; 12:10) and to Jesus' suffering outside the gate (Heb 13:12).¹⁶

II. SEMITIC USAGE

The singular of the Hebrew word *ša'ar* occurs about 228 times in the HB. The plural absolute *šə'ārīm* and the plural construct *ša'ārê* appear about 31 times each. In addition the plural is controlled by pronominal suffixes about 52 times. The participial form "gatekeeper" occurs in both singular *šō'ēr* and plural *šō'ārīm*.

The plural construct form of *ša'ar* may designate gates of a city (Jer 17:24–25; Ezek 48:31), of a named city like Ekron (1 Sam 17:52) or Jerusalem (Neh 7:3; Jer 1:15; 17:19, 21; 22:19; Lam 4:12), or of the "daughter" of Zion (Ps 9:[15]14). There are the gates of the land (Jer 15:7; Nah 3:13), the river gates (Nah 2:[7]6), the gates of the wall of a city (Neh 2:17), the gates of the fortress of the temple (2:8) and the gates of the camp of the Lord (2 Chr 31:2). There are the gates of the temple (33:19; Jer 22:4; Ezek 41:17) and the gates of the courts of the temple (44:12). By metonymy, the gate represents the whole city (Gen 22:17; 24:60). In these more or less literal uses of the word "gate" the gates serve both for entry and for defense. But neither concept is sufficiently predominant to build an exclusive case on it.

In metaphorical language one encounters "the gate of heaven" (Gen 28:17) and "gates of righteousness" (Ps 118:19), identified with "the gate of the Lord" (118:20), which give admission to the privilege of praising the Lord. The gate is also the place where the wicked bow down before the good (Prov 14:19). A close brush with death is described as approaching the "gates of death" (Ps 107:18; cf. also 9:[14]13). Hezekiah, after his recovery from threatened death, describes his experience: "I am consigned

¹¹ Vergil *Aeneid* 4.51–58.

¹² Ovid *Metamorphoses* 4.453.

¹³ Propertius *Elegies* 4.11.

¹⁴ *PGM* 4.2719.

¹⁵ The list is dependent on H. Hommel, "Die Tore des Hades," *ZNW* 80 (1989) 104–105; S. Reinach, "Les Portes de Enfer," *RArch* 20 (1912) 294–296.

¹⁶ J. Jeremias, "*pylē*," *TDNT* 6.924–928.

to the gates of Sheol [*pylais hadou*, LXX] for the rest of my years" (Isa 38:10). He later declares, "You have held back my life from the pit of destruction" (38:17).¹⁷

Sirach speaks of a cry coming "from the gates of the world of the dead" (*mēša'ārê šē'ōl*; Sir 51:9).¹⁸ The QL continues the literal use of *ša'ar* with the two gates of the fortress (1QM 9:14), with the various elements of the troops going out of the gate for muster (7:8, 15–16; 8:4; 4Q493 2, 9) but with the curious expression "opening the gates of war," meaning the outbreak of war (1QM 3:1, 7; 16:3). This scroll also speaks of the gates of the sanctuary (2:3), of the gates of victories (18:7) and of the gates continually open for the coming of the wealth of the nations (12:13; 4Q492 6). The beginning of the Sabbath is determined by the location of the shadow on the gate (1QCDam 10:16). A benediction speaks of the gate of the holy height (4Q500 4).

The *Temple Scroll* contains allusions too numerous to list here to various gates of the temple and its courts (11QTemple 33:10, etc.). It also alludes to the gate of the city as the place of the sitting of the court (64:4; 65:10) as well as using "all your gates" for the entire community (41:11; 42:14; 45:15; 50:12). "In your gates" means "at home" (52:10, 17; 53:4).

Interesting metaphorical uses of *ša'ar* include the numerous references in a daily prayer to "gates of light" (4Q503 3:14; 4:2; 8:10; 11:12; 12:20; 19:2) and to "gates of glory" (4Q503 51–55 5:5). In the *Thanksgiving Hymns* a hypothetical reconstruction yields *ša'ārê šāmayim* ("gates of heaven"; 1QH 3:17). There are also "everlasting gates" (6:31), and most interesting of all for our purposes is the one text that speaks of one's coming to the "gates of death" (6:24) as being like coming to a fortified city.

Rabbinic literature has the expression "gates of Sheol" only in *Tg. Isa* 38:10. After the first century AD the rabbis speak only of the entrance to *gê hinnōm*, a phenomenon leaving the reader to determine from the context when the intermediate or final *gê hinnōm* is meant.¹⁹

Hadēs (meaning "the unseen") is frequent in the LXX, most often rendering *šē'ōl* but occasionally rendering five other terms. It is the place to which the dead go (2 Macc 6:23; 3 Macc 4:8; 5:42; 6:31).²⁰ *Hadēs* occurs in eleven NT passages, all translated as "hell" in the KJV except 1 Cor 15:55 (following the Textus Receptus) where "grave" is used.²¹ In the only other occurrence (apart from Matt 16:18) of *hadēs* in Matthew, Capernaum will be brought down to Hades (Matt 11:23), a statement that is paralleled in Luke 10:15. In other sources the rich man lifted up his eyes in *hadēs* (16:23), and Jesus' soul was not left in *hadēs* (Acts 2:27, 31). The Christ has the keys of Death and *hadēs* (Rev 1:18), and at the opening of the

¹⁷ H. J. Austel, "*sha'ar*," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (ed. R. L. Harris et al.; Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2.946.

¹⁸ LXX: *hyper thanatou rhyseos ediethen*; REB: "beginning to be rescued from death."

¹⁹ Jeremias, "*pylē*," *TDNT* 6.925.

²⁰ J. Jeremias, "*hadēs*," *TWNT* 1.146–149. Hades occurs in three early patristic passages (*I Clem.* 4:12; 51:4; *Pol. Phil.* 1:2).

²¹ Matt 11:25; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; 2 Cor 15:55; Rev 1:18; 6:8; 20:13–14.

fourth seal Death and *hadēs* follow the pale horse (6:8). Death and *hadēs* deliver up the dead in them (20:13), and the two are cast into the lake of fire (20:14). Josephus portrays Samuel as summoned from Hades by the medium of Endor.²²

None of these passages outside of the one in Matthew speaks of “gates of *hadēs*.” The NT makes a clear distinction between *hadēs* and *geenna* with the latter being the place of punishment of the wicked.²³

The verb *katischyein* (“prevail”) occurs only twice more in the NT: in Luke 21:36 where the disciples are to pray to have strength to escape the eschatological events, and in 23:23 where the loud voices of the mob prevail at the trial of Jesus.²⁴ A compound verb sometimes dispenses with any further preposition.²⁵ Hence none here precedes the pronoun *autēs*. *Katischyein* occurs more than eighty times in the LXX, rendering sixteen different roots but most frequently rendering *hāzaq* in various *binyānim*. For example Jeremiah asks: “Why do they that grieve me prevail against me?” (Jer 15:18).

Assuming that the Semitic background is nearer at hand than the Greek background we have earlier surveyed, back of the imagery used by Jesus in the gospel of Matthew is the statement of Hezekiah where he complains that he is consigned to “the gates of Sheol” (Isa 38:10; cf. “bars of Sheol” in Job 17:16).²⁶ There is also the expression “gates of death” (Job 38:17; Ps 9:[14]13; 107:18).²⁷ A Qumran hymn (as noted above) has the statement: “And I will come to the gates of death, and I will be like one who enters a fortified city.”²⁸ A wisdom writer declares: “For you have power over life and death; you lead mortals down to the gates of Hades and back again” (Wis 16:13). Also to be compared are “imploping the Ruler over every power to manifest himself and be merciful to them as they stood now at the gates of Hades” (3 Macc 5:51) and “For a moment my soul was poured out to death; [I was] near the gates of Hades” (Ps. Sol. 16:2). The Syriac *Apocalypse of Baruch* has God show Moses “the mouth of *geenna*” (2 *Apoc. Bar.* 59:9), the place of the wicked. Paul declares of the risen Lord: “Death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom 6:8).

III. TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

Matthew 16:18c was rendered into Latin as *portae inferi non praevalent adversum eam*. That in turn came into English with John Wycliffe as

²² Josephus *Ant.* 6.14.2 §332.

²³ Matt 5:22, 29–30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; Jas 3:6; Jeremias, “*pylē*,” *TDNT* 6.926 n. 46. *Geenna* occurs in an early patristic passage in a case speaking of the flames of hell (2 *Clem.* 5:4).

²⁴ W. Grundmann, “*ischyō* . . . *katischyō*,” *TDNT* 3.397–398.

²⁵ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1959) 90.

²⁶ The LXX has merely *eis hadēn* in Job 17:16.

²⁷ A. S. Kapelrud, “The Gates of Hell and the Guardian Angels of Paradise,” *JAOS* 70 (1950) 151–156, attempts to trace the gate concept to Sumerian texts and argues for a survival of mythological traces in Job 38:17.

²⁸ 1QH 6:24–25.

"the gatis of helle schulen not haue migt agens it." Luther used "Hölle" in the German Bible. Tyndale rendered "the gates of hell shall not prevayle ageynst it," and that rendering with modification in spelling maintained itself in English translation through the KJV except for the Geneva Bible, which had "the gates of hell shal not overcome it." At the beginning of this century the ASV had "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it," and then the RSV had "the powers of death shall not prevail against it." But the NRSV reverted to "the gates of Hades will not prevail," with which the NKJV also agrees. The NEB and REB have "the powers of death shall never conquer it." The NIV renders "the gates of Hades will not overcome it." The NASB has "the gates of Hades shall not overpower it," TEV "not even death shall ever be able to overpower it," and the NABR "the gates of the nether world ('jaws of death,' NAB) shall not prevail against it." The Living Bible has "all the powers of hell shall not prevail against it," and the NJB has "the gates of the underworld can never overpower it."

The term Hades was introduced into English about AD 1600 in connection with theological controversies about the fifth article of the Apostles' Creed ["He descended into Hell"].²⁹ The term only began to be used in English Bible translation with the RV (1881). "Hell" for the realm of the dead, on the other hand, can be traced back as early as the *Vespasian Psalter* of AD 825. English, however, also used "hell" for the place of final punishment as early as King Aelfred in 833.³⁰ The KJV (as was natural) followed the older and common usage of its time, making no distinction between the two concepts. The English translations of the fathers have continued to use "hell" as the rendering of *hadēs* into the twentieth century. When English did adopt a distinction between *hadēs* and *geenna*, the ordinary person's thinking did not change. He continued to think in terms of *geenna* when reading Matt 16:18. That influence persists even today. There lies the persuasion of "hell and all it can do" when one reads Matt 16:18.

IV. THE CHURCH FATHERS

Matthew 16:18c is not cited in extant sources of the second century. Peter's confession and Jesus' response draw the attention of Clement of Alexandria,³¹ but not the phrase we are studying. Tertullian has Peter as the rock on which the Church is built.³² He discusses the power of the keys and restricts the Lord's promise to Peter but does not discuss the gates of Hades.³³ The *Sibylline Oracles*, in a section thought to come from the *Apocalypse of Peter*, has the angel Uriel open the gates of Hades (not forged of metal) and lead forth to the judgment ancient phantoms such as the Titans, the giants, those destroyed by the flood, and those destroyed by

²⁹ "Hades," *Oxford English Dictionary* 5.13.

³⁰ "Hell," *Oxford English Dictionary* 5.203.

³¹ Clement *Stromata* 6.15.65 (ANF 2.511; PG 9.357).

³² Tertullian *De praescript.* 22 (ANF 3.253; PL 2.54).

³³ Tertullian *De pudicitia* 21 (ANF 4.99–100; PL 2.1025).

the sea or wild animals, serpents and birds.³⁴ Ephraim in the third century cites Matt 16:18 as “the gate-bars of Sheol.”³⁵

Origen (who subscribed to the concept of the triple meaning of Scripture) asked whether “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” referred to Peter alone while implying that they shall prevail against the other apostles and the perfect of the Church. He felt that the statement held in regard to all and in the case of each of them. For him the statements of the context applied to all the apostles.³⁶ Elsewhere Origen is specific that Peter is one against whom the gates of Hades do not prevail.³⁷

Origen found the pronoun *autēs* of the passage to be ambiguous, possibly referring to either the rock or the Church. But he felt they were one and the same, with the gates of Hades prevailing against neither. By allegory he applied the phrase “the way of the serpent on a rock” (Prov 30:19) to the rock’s being impenetrable to the serpent. He concluded that the rock is stronger than the gates of Hades that are opposing it. The gates of Hades prevail against every man who is outside the rock.³⁸

Some saw Matt 16:18 as a promise that Peter would not die before the *parousia*.³⁹ For Origen, each sin through which there is a way to Hades is a gate of Hades. Each person who is an author of any evil opinion has become an architect of a certain gate of Hades. The gates of Hades are many, but none will prevail against the rock or against the Church that builds upon the rock. The gates gain mastery over some who do not resist and strive against them. One of the gates is named “fornication” and another “denial.” Each of the heterodox has built a gate: Marcion one, Basilides another, Valentinus still another.⁴⁰

Origen (shifting to “gates of death,” Ps 9:13–14) with OT prooftexts contrasts the “gates of Hades” with the “gates of Zion.” The shift from one gate to the other is a present process. Self-control opposes dissoluteness, righteousness opposes unrighteousness, courage opposes cowardice, prudence opposes want of prudence, knowledge opposes knowledge falsely so-called. Over all of these is the wicked one himself.

The temperate man opens the gate of temperance, and the same is true of those who possess the rest of the virtues. All together are a kingdom of heaven. The gates of Hades prevail against the person who does not bind or loose according to God’s will, but not against the person who judges righteously. Those of the episcopate must speak wholesomely. But if one is bound with the cords of his sins, he binds and looses to no purpose. If one who is not a Peter by character imagines that he can bind or loose, “he is puffed up, not understanding the meaning of the Scriptures, and, being

³⁴ *Sib. Or.* 2:226–234.

³⁵ J. A. Robinson, *S. Ephraim’s Quotations from the Gospel* (TextsS 7; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1901) 30.

³⁶ *Origen Commentary on Matthew* Bk. 12:11 (ANF 10.456; PG 13.1000–1005).

³⁷ *Origen De Principiis* 3.2.5 (ANF 4.333; PG 3.141).

³⁸ *Origen Commentary on Matthew* Bk. 12:11 (ANF 10.456–457; PG 13.1000–1005).

³⁹ Jeremias, “*pylē*,” *TDNT* 6.926 n. 51.

⁴⁰ *Origen Commentary on Matthew* Bk. 12:12 (ANF 10.457; PG 13.1005–1008).

puffed up, has fallen into the ruin of the devil.”⁴¹ One who is a Peter in goodness, “having been exalted by the Word from the gates of death,” may “publish the praises of God in the gates of the daughter of Zion.”⁴²

Already in Origen the security of the Church is deduced: “And Peter, on whom [for Origen] the Church of Christ is built, against which the gates of Hades shall not prevail, has left behind one letter which is accepted.”⁴³

Cyprian (AD 210–258) found Matt 16:18–19 (which he quotes, using *portae inferorum*) as describing the honor of a bishop and the order of his church: “The church is established in the bishop and the clergy, and all who stand fast in the faith.”⁴⁴ Cyprian writes to Nestorius:

I declare to you that the church is not going to permit your shamelessness against her God, and she is the very church against whom the gates of hell [*inferi*] have not been able to prevail. You yourself know how many trials she has endured, in such a way, however, that no one has prevailed against her because she is on a rock in her faith. Look, therefore, at what you are about to do, and farewell.⁴⁵

The Church fathers, following Cyprian, were far more concerned about the hermeneutical possibilities in the concept of the Church’s being built on the rock (Peter) than on implications of the gates of Hades not prevailing against it. For the primacy question Matt 16:18 is often quoted in its entirety without comment on the gates of Hades. Greek writers used *hadēs* in their quotations,⁴⁶ and Latin writers used *inferus*, usually with the verb *praevalēbunt*.⁴⁷ This paper will not trace the primacy question.⁴⁸

Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 313–386) cites Matt 16:18 as a proof of the establishing of a Church among the Gentiles that displaced the Jews from their position. He does not exegete 16:18c.⁴⁹

In the fourth century Eusebius notes that the Church is in no way vanquished or subjected by Christ’s enemies, “nay yields not even to the gates of death, because of that one speech uttered by Himself, saying, ‘Upon the rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.’”⁵⁰

The concept of the multiple meanings of Scripture relieved early writers of the necessity of settling on one meaning for the crucial words of

⁴¹ Ibid. 12:13–14 (ANF 10.457–459; PG 13.1007–1016).

⁴² Origen *Against Celsus* 6:77 (ANF 4.608; PG 11.1415).

⁴³ Origen *Commentary on John* 5:3 (FC 80.111); Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.8.

⁴⁴ Cyprian *Ep.* 26.1 (17.1) “To the Lapsed” (ANF 5.305; PG 4.305–306).

⁴⁵ Cyprian *Letters* 6 and 7.2 (FC 76.50; PG 77.57).

⁴⁶ Palladius *Dialogue on John Chrysostom* 19 (ACW 45.127; PG 47.68).

⁴⁷ Cyprian *The Unity of the Church* 1.4 (ACW 5.126; PL 4.513); Paulinus of Nola *Letter* 23:43 (ACW 36.46; PL 61.284). Cyprian uses the verb *vincent*.

⁴⁸ See J. Waterworth, *A Commentary, By Writers of the First Five Centuries on the Place of St. Peter in the New Testament, and That of St. Peter’s Successors in the Church* (London: Thomas Richardson, 1871). This study is indebted to Waterworth both for collection of material and for some translations. See statistics on various interpretations of “the rock” in H. Burn-Murdoch, *The Development of the Papacy* (London: Faber and Faber, n.d.) 49, 431.

⁴⁹ Cyril *The Catechetical Lectures* 18.25 (LCC 4.187; FC 64.133; PG 33.1045).

⁵⁰ Eusebius *Preparation of the Gospel* 1.3.11 (GCS 43.1.12–13).

Matt 16:18c. In general the antecedent of the pronoun *autēs* is considered to be either Peter or the Church with no great difference seen in the options. A third alternative appears when Athanasius declares that the world is founded on the Lord's faith, "and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."⁵¹

Occasionally Greek writers attempt to define "gates of Hades." Epiphanius (AD 385) understands them as heresies and heresiarchs against which firm faith in Peter is the safeguard.⁵² When Chrysostom (while admitting the phrase may be obscure) asks the question "What are the gates of Hades?" he replies that what the gate is to a city the gate of Hades is. It is a danger leading down to Hades.⁵³

All are agreed that the ongoing permanency of the Church is promised. Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394) quotes a prayer from Macrina addressing the Lord:

You crushed the heads of the serpent who seized us with his jaws in the abyss of disobedience. Breaking down the gates of hell [*hadon*] and overcoming the one who had the empire of death, You opened up for us a path to the resurrection.⁵⁴

John Chrysostom (AD 344–406) accumulates prophecies that stretch from Jesus' time until his coming, among which he includes Matt 16:18. He asks how the gates of Hades have not prevailed against the Church and answers that the Church has never been conquered.⁵⁵ In a homily Chrysostom has the Church built on the faith of the confession Peter made, and he follows that with citing "the gates of Hades."⁵⁶ Like others of his period he understood the passage to be a promise of the permanence of the Church: "How many tyrants have wished to overcome the church? . . . And they did not prevail. . . . Where are those who warred against her? But where is the church? She shines brighter than the sun. They are quenched, she is immortal."⁵⁷

Once the doctrine of the security of the Church was asserted, the ancient Church seldom questioned that Jesus was promising the perpetuity of the Church. Athanasius (AD 356–360) notes:

And so the works of the Jews are undone, for they were a shadow; but the church is firmly established; it is "founded on the rock," and "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."⁵⁸

Chrysostom affirms that the wonders of the past were real and that future and promised things are also real:

But that my meaning may be yet plainer, let me illustrate it from the actual case. . . . He said, "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against the Church."

⁵¹ Athanasius *In Ps. 118* 90 (PG 27.1191–1192).

⁵² Epiphanius *Ancoratus* n. 9 (PG 43.33–34; cf. *Haer.* 25.365.24).

⁵³ Chrysostom *Inscript.* Act 11 n. 1 T. ii, B. i. 61 (Waterworth, *Commentary* 185n).

⁵⁴ Gregory *The Life of St. Macrina* (FC 58.180; PG 46.983).

⁵⁵ Chrysostom *In Hom. 6 in 1 Cor.* n. 3 (PG 61.52); cf. *Hom.* 7 n. 9 (PG 61.66).

⁵⁶ Chrysostom *In Matt. Hom.* 54 n. 1, 2 (PG 58.534–535).

⁵⁷ Chrysostom *Serm. antequam iret in exil.* n. 1, 2 (Waterworth, *Commentary* 88).

⁵⁸ Athanasius *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 4.34 (NPNF² 4.446; PG 26.520).

... From the prophecy uttered about the Church let him learn to believe the miracle. For the word spoken so many years before, came to pass then, and received accomplishment; for "the gates of Hades prevailed not against the Church." You see that he who spake truth in the prophecy, it is clear that he also wrought the miracle; and he ... both wrought the miracle and brings to accomplishment the words which he spake.⁵⁹

For Chrysostom the statement was an example not yet fulfilled

as that even until now time has been unable to force aside the predicted course of things ... other predictions which extend along from that time until his coming. ... "Upon this Rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."⁶⁰

Again speaking of things Christ foretold, Chrysostom notes:

He said, "in the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33), that is, no man shall get the better of you. And this we see by the events come to pass. He said that "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against the church" (Mt. 16:18), even though persecuted, and no one shall quench the preaching [of the gospel]: and the experience of events bears witness to this prediction also; yet when he said these things, it was very hard to believe them.⁶¹

Athanasius challenges the Jews to show that the prophecy to Peter is false. He details the sorts of opposition the Church has suffered and asserts: "Yet none of these things destroyed the Church nor made it weaker."⁶² He finds it all the more marvelous that these attacks were made when the Church was beginning than it would have been when the Church had world strength with the support of the emperors.

Again taking up the same theme Chrysostom challenges that the prediction be put to any test chosen. "The words: 'The gates of hell shall not prevail against it,' mean the dangers which beget death, the dangers which lead us down to hell."⁶³ He boasts that Christ's followers built a Church out of souls (not out of stones) because they, despite persecutions, had the support of Christ who promised that "the gates of Hades. . . ."⁶⁴ The numerous pagan emperors, and other persecutors, have left the church treasures that will never perish.⁶⁵

Chrysostom is also capable of arguing for a different meaning for "the gates of Hades" when discussing that Lazarus was raised: "What marvelous and unexpected things Christ did! He loosed the soul from the bonds of death. He burst open the portals of Hades."⁶⁶

Cyril of Alexandria (AD 424) pictures the Church "firmly set and founded" on the rock, "remaining indestructible forever by the gates of

⁵⁹ Chrysostom *Homilies on First Corinthians* 7.19 (9) (NPNF¹ 12.42; PG 61.64).

⁶⁰ Chrysostom *Homilies on First Corinthians* 6.6 (3) (NPNF¹ 12.32; PG 61.52).

⁶¹ Chrysostom *Homilies on Hebrews* ch. 11, 21:5 (3) (NPNF¹ 14.463; PG 63.157).

⁶² Athanasius *Discourses against Judaizing Christians* 5.2.8 (FC 68.102–103; PG 48.885).

⁶³ Chrysostom *Demonstration Against the Pagans* 12.2 (FC 73.238; PG 48.829).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 14.3 (FC 73.248; PG 48.833).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 15.1–3 (FC 73.249; PG 48.833).

⁶⁶ Chrysostom *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God, Homily* 9.22 (FC 72.242; PG 48.284).

Hades.”⁶⁷ He cites Matt 16:18 as proof, talking about those “who striving by persecution to destroy the Church of Christ, have advanced her to greater glory and power.”⁶⁸ “See here he calls those who assail her gates as destructive and pestilential, and as accustomed to lead down to the depths of Hades those who adhere to them.”⁶⁹ The Church is unshakable, and “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it, according to the Savior, for it has him for a foundation.”⁷⁰

The Latin Bible translated *hadēs* as *infernus* (Matt 11:23; Luke 16:23; Rev 1:18; 6:8; 20:13–14) except in Matt 16:18, where it is *inferus*. Acts 2:27–31 has *in inferno*. In Latin, *geenna* becomes *gehenna* in all cases. The investigation of Matt 16:18 needs to be expanded (which this paper has not attempted) into investigation of what Latin writers understood by *infernus*. English translators of the fathers consistently render the term “hell.” Augustine says that he has not found a place in Scripture where “lower world” (*infernus*) is applied to the place where the souls of the just are at rest.⁷¹ But in *The City of God* he states: “For it does not seem absurd to believe that the ancient saints who believed in Christ and his future coming, were kept in places far removed indeed from the torments of the wicked, but yet in hell [*apud infernos*].”⁷²

Among Latin writers Hilary (AD 356), engaged in the Arian controversy, seems first to have introduced the concept that Peter’s confession was the rock on which the Church rests:

Upon this rock, then, of the confession, is the building of the Church; through this faith are “the gates of hell” unavailing against her.⁷³

Hilary is as certain as others of the permanence of the Church: “Through this faith are ‘the gates of hell’ unavailing against her.”⁷⁴ Whether *infernus* is understood as the world of the dead or hell itself, the attack concept is obvious. On the other hand Hilary can also have the Church “dissolve the infernal laws and the gates of hell, and all the bars of death.”⁷⁵

Optatus of Milevis (AD 386) remarks that pestilence sends its victims to hell and that hell is known to have its gates against which Peter received the saving keys of the kingdom of heaven. Apparently Optatus understood the keys to be the antecedent of the pronoun in his reading “the gates of hell shall not overcome them [*earum*].”⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Cyril *Dial. 4 de Trin.* (Waterworth, *Commentary* 148).

⁶⁸ Cyril *In Matt.* c. 16, no. 54–55 (PG 72.423).

⁶⁹ Cyril *In Zech.* 93, no. 782 (PG 72.222–223).

⁷⁰ Cyril *In Zech.* no. 976 (Waterworth, *Commentary* 143).

⁷¹ Augustine *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 12.33 (63) (ACW 42.255); *Epist.* 187.2.6 (PL 33.834).

⁷² Augustine *The City of God* 20.15 (PL 41).

⁷³ Hilary *De Trinit.* 6.36–37 (PL 10.186–187). “This is the one happy rock confessed by the mouth of Peter” (T. ii, *De Trin.* ii. 23 (Waterworth, *Commentary* 43).

⁷⁴ Hilary *De Trin.* 6.36–37 (PL 10.186–187).

⁷⁵ Hilary *In Matt.* 16.7 (PL 9.1010).

⁷⁶ Optatus *De schism. Donat.* ii.4 (PL 11.956).

John Cassian (c. AD 429) declared: "The gates of hell are the faith, yea, rather the perfidy of heretics. For as far as hell is from heaven, so far is he who denies from him who confesses Christ to be God."⁷⁷

Ambrose (AD 333–397) makes faith the foundation of the Church with the promise made for the faith of Peter, not his flesh. He asserts: "The confession vanquished hell." The confession has shut out more than one heresy. Like a ship buffeted by waves, "the foundation of the church ought to hold against all heresies."⁷⁸ According to Ambrose the individual Christian should strive to be a rock and therefore be in the Church. If one is, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against thee." Ambrose's shift of the object pronoun to a second person seems unparalleled. He elaborates that the gates of hell are the gates of death. But the gates of death cannot be the gates of the Church.⁷⁹ Elsewhere Ambrose homilizes: "Where Peter is, there the church is, there death is not, but life eternal, and therefore he [Jesus] added, 'and the gates of hell prevailed not against it.'" Ambrose has the gates not closing against Peter. Peter opened heaven and closed hell.⁸⁰

Ambrose also asserts:

Go thy way, therefore, to my brethren—that is, to those everlasting doors, which, as soon as they see Jesus, are lifted up. Peter is an "everlasting door," against whom the gates of hell [*portae inferi*] shall not prevail. John and James the sons of thunder, to wit, are "everlasting doors." Everlasting are the doors of the Church where the prophet desirous to proclaim the praises of Christ says: "That I may tell thy praises in the gates of the daughter of Zion."⁸¹

In discussing death Ambrose asks:

Or is this not the land of the dead, where there is the shadow of death, the gate of death, the body of death? Therefore it is granted to Peter that "the gates of hell [*inferi*] shall not prevail against him." The gates of hell are these earthly gates, on which account the psalmist also says: "You raise me up from the gates of death" [Ps 9:(14)13].⁸²

Jerome (AD 347–419) in commenting on the gates of Zion (Ps 87:1, 21) says:

He does not mean the gates which we see today in dust and ashes; the gates he means are those against which hell prevails [*praevalent infernus*] not and through which the multitude of those who believe in Christ enter in.⁸³

Jerome, starting from Ps 124:1 as a proof of stability, finds Peter to be one of the mountains upon which Christ founds the Church.⁸⁴ Jerome defines the gates of hell as "vices and sins, or certainly the doctrines of heretics,

⁷⁷ Cassian *De Incarnat.* 3.1.4 (PL 50.70); *Bib. Max.* T. Vii (Waterworth, *Commentary* 155).

⁷⁸ Ambrose *De Incarnat.* 4–5 n. 30, 32–33; cf. n. 34 (PL 16.826–827).

⁷⁹ Ambrose *In Luc.* 6.93–94, 97–98 (PL 15.1693–1694); cf. *Luc.* 7, n. 5, 9 (PL 15.1700–1701).

⁸⁰ Ambrose *In Ps.* 40, n. 30 (PL 14.1134).

⁸¹ Ambrose *Of the Christian Faith* 4.2.25 (NPNF² 10.265; PL 16.621).

⁸² Ambrose, *Death as a Good* 12.56 (FC 65.111; PL 16.621).

⁸³ Jerome *Letter* 108:9 ("To Eustochium") (NPNF² 6.199; PL 22.884).

⁸⁴ Jerome T. iv. L 1, c. 2 *In Isa.* (Waterworth, *Commentary* 112).

by which men enticed are led to hell.” He rejects the idea that Jesus’ words were “spoken of death so that the apostles would not be subject to the conditions of death, whose martyrdom we see so illustrious.”⁸⁵

Augustine (AD 400) sees Matt 16:18 as a support for the See of Peter: “This is the rock which the proud gates of hell do not overcome.”⁸⁶ He quotes 16:18 as a basis for tracing the succession of Roman bishops.⁸⁷ In a sermon, however, Augustine has the Church built on the rock that Peter confesses—that is, on Christ—and he elaborates: “I will build you on myself, not myself on you.”⁸⁸

Augustine in his *Retractions* notes the difference between promising to build the Church on Peter (*Petrus*) and on the *petra* that was the Christ whom Peter confessed. But he then concludes: “Let the reader choose whatever of these two senses may be the more probable.”⁸⁹

Maximus of Turin in his sermons on the early fifth century made a slightly different approach by having the gates of Hades not overcome Peter:

If the gates of hell shall not prevail against the apostle and martyr Peter, then whoever is joined to the martyr will not be held in the gate of the underworld. For the gate of hell does not hold the martyrs because the kingdom of paradise receives them.⁹⁰

He further homilizes:

For such is the strength of the apostolic faith that all the elements are open to it; that is to say, the angelic portals are not closed to it, the gates of the underworld [*tartari*] do not prevail against it; and floods of waters do not overwhelm it.⁹¹

In yet another homily he confusedly speaks as if Christ’s fast of forty days came at the end of his life and urges:

Therefore we too, beloved brethren, ought to fast continually and devotedly in this space of time so that the Lord might be propitiated by us, the heavens opened to us, and hell [*inferna*] not prevail [*voleant*].⁹²

Papal figures of this period were making the most of Matt 16:18. Leo (AD 440) has the Church prevail over “the gates of hell” and the laws of death.⁹³ But he also sees that neither the wickedness of men nor the gates of hell would prevail against it.⁹⁴

⁸⁵ Jerome *In Matt. 16* (Waterworth, *Commentary* 45).

⁸⁶ Augustine T. ix. *Ps. in Part. Donat.* (Waterworth, *Commentary* 121).

⁸⁷ Augustine T. ii. *Ep.* 53, n. 2, *Generoso* (Waterworth, *Commentary* 121).

⁸⁸ Augustine *Serm.* 76, n. 1, 3–4 (Waterworth, *Commentary* 128).

⁸⁹ Augustine *Retractions* T. i. L 1; 21:1 (Waterworth, *Commentary* 121; *PL* 32.583–656).

⁹⁰ Maximus *Sermon* 12 (ACW 50.32–33).

⁹¹ Maximus *Sermon* 52 (27) (ACW 50.128; *PL* 57.583).

⁹² Maximus *Sermon* 35 (28) (ACW 50.86; *PL* 57.590).

⁹³ Leo *Sermon* 51 *Hom. Sabb. ante Sec. Dom. Quadr. c.* 1 (Waterworth, *Commentary* 162).

⁹⁴ Leo *Ep.* 10, *ad Episc. per prov. Vienn. in causa Hilarii*, n. 1 (Waterworth, *Commentary* 163).

Simplicius (AD 468) interprets the statement as a promise to Peter's successors.⁹⁵ Felix III (AD 460) justified councils of Italian priests in settling questions on Matt 16:18.⁹⁶

Gelasius (AD 492) affirms that the promise is that the gates of hell should never prevail against the confession of the blessed apostle Peter but then also makes the promise one to the Roman See, apparently earlier recognized by the group assembled at Nicea.⁹⁷ Hence by the end of the fifth century the statement in Matthew had become the Lord's promise that the Roman See "should never be conquered by the gates of hell, and that it would be a safe harbor though tossed by waves."⁹⁸

Cassiodorus in the sixth century allegorizes in his Christological treatment of the Psalms:

For he hath established the world which will not be moved. The third topic of the thesis appears: we earlier called it "his works." He established the world, in other words, the church, when he said in the gospel: "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This is true praise and a wondrous proclamation, that the earth which denotes the Church scattered through the world is not moved at all, though it is battered by frequent shaking.⁹⁹

Allegorizing a phrase from Psalm 45, Cassiodorus states:

"It shall not be moved" is said of the Church, to whom that unique promise was given: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." The Church cannot be moved as it is seen to be founded on the most solid rock which is the Lord Christ.¹⁰⁰

Cassiodorus is unusual for his period in making the rock to be Christ.

Allegorizing the robe of Christ, Cassiodorus states:

It [the Catholic Church] is woven from the top because no man parts or tears it. With the greatest strength of enduring firmness, it abides with the power of its unity. Of it Truth itself says: Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.¹⁰¹

He also asserts:

"On the earth he founded it forever." Though the Jerusalem which is predestined lies in the age to come, it is known to be founded on earth, that is, in the hope of eternity, entertained by holy persons. As Peter was told in the gospel: "Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the

⁹⁵ Simplicius *Ep. 4 Zeoni (Basilisco)*, Labb T. iv (Waterworth, *Commentary* 168).

⁹⁶ Felix *Concil. Rom.* ii. Labb iv (Waterworth, *Commentary* 170).

⁹⁷ Gelasius *Ep. 1 Euphem.* Labb iv; see *Ep. 4 ad Faustum* (Waterworth, *Commentary* 170–171).

⁹⁸ Gelasius *Ep. 14 seu Tract. Gelas.* (Waterworth, *Commentary* 173).

⁹⁹ Cassiodorus *Commentary on the Psalms*, Ps 92:2 (ACW 52.396; PL 70.662).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Ps 45:6 (5) (ACW 51.455; PL 70.330).

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Ps 21:19 (20) (ACW 51.227; PL 70.161).

gates of hell shall not prevail against it." See then how it is known to be founded on earth in the dimension of eternity: for elsewhere too we read of the Church: "God founded it forever."¹⁰²

V. MIDDLE AGES AND REFORMATION

By the late middle ages Matt 16:18c was being used against the Catholic Church—still, however, in a sense of promise of infallibility. In 1381 Henry of Langenstein wrote:

For the Universal Church, which is not able to err or to be exposed to mortal sin, is indeed superior to the college of cardinals and the pope because he does not have this prerogative. It was not said of him, "And the gates of hell shall not prevail against her (*eam*)," but of the universal church. Hence Pope Anastatius fell into heresy and Pope Marcellinus into idolatry.¹⁰³

John Hus reasoned in like categories:

"The gates of hell do not prevail against my church" . . . but against the pope and his followers the gates of hell do prevail, for they are notorious in the world over their open impiety and wickedness. . . . Therefore the pope and his followers are not the church of which Christ speaks.¹⁰⁴

The Hebrew text preserved in *Even Bohan* of Shem-Tob ben Isaac ben Shaphat of the fourteenth century interprets Matt 16:18c as teaching that the antecedent of the pronoun is Peter as the stone but also interprets *hadēs* as *gē hinnōm*: "The Gates of Gehenna will not prevail against you."¹⁰⁵

By Reformation times "the gates of hell" had clearly come to be understood as "all that the forces of evil can do." In application it was not limited to the perpetuity of the Church. Luther wrote an open letter on February 14, 1524, to the people of Miltenberg:

Meanwhile through our words, God speaks his Word, which praises his grace. It is rock and sure foundation against which the gates of hell can do nothing.¹⁰⁶

Luther found encouragement in Jesus' statement. He charges: "He will find, however, not only that words accomplish nothing, but neither do the gates of hell."¹⁰⁷ And again: "This is a sound conclusion and a valid inference, against which not even the gates of hell will prevail."¹⁰⁸

Luther was sure that Christ will know how to find and preserve his Christendom, even against the gates of hell, though emperors and kings

¹⁰² Ibid. Ps 77:69 (73) (ACW 52.273; PL 70.571).

¹⁰³ Henry of Langenstein, *A Letter on Behalf of a Council of Peace* (LCC 14.118).

¹⁰⁴ Cited in M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (LCC 17.164).

¹⁰⁵ G. Howard, *The Gospel of Matthew According to a Primitive Text* (Macon: Mercer, 1987) 80–81.

¹⁰⁶ M. Luther, *To the Christians at Miltenberg*, Feb. 14, 1524 (LCC 18.203).

¹⁰⁷ M. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (LCC 17.284).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. (LCC 17.291).

neither would nor could help in any way.¹⁰⁹ "If the church is to perish, then Christ upon whom it is built as upon a rock against the gates of hell must perish first."¹¹⁰ He promises to prove that the papacy comes from the devil so thoroughly that even the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.¹¹¹

Heinrich Bullinger asserts:

To the same context there belongs that other saying in the Gospel: "and the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church"; a saying which is indeed a great comfort to the faithful in so many and so great persecutions intended to the utter destruction and overthrow of the Church.¹¹²

For Calvin also the promise of Matt 16:18 was a comfort:

Anyone who possesses this knowledge with Paul knows by experience that it is not for nothing that our faith has been called "the victory that overcometh the world"; or that Christ said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18). I say, The man who remains tranquil in the midst of storms and tempests is one who has firm knowledge that God has spoken and will not lie.¹¹³

Calvin noted that the pronoun "it" in Matt 16:18c could refer either to faith or to the Church, but he preferred the Church "because the church shall stand victorious against all the power of Satan; that is, the truth of God on which her faith rests shall ever remain unshaken."

In particular this promise is worthy of note, that those who are united in Christ and acknowledge Him to be Christ and Mediator, shall remain safe from all harm even unto the end. . . . The trumpet has sounded to prepare for the battle. The word "gates" without doubt denotes a kind of power and fortification.¹¹⁴

VI. THE MODERN PERIOD

A. Plummer aptly described the problem of Matt 16:18 in its traditional and most popular interpretation when he said, "Gates keep people in and keep people out of a citadel, but they do not fight."¹¹⁵ At that time W. C. Allen considered the passage to be "a pictorial way of saying 'The organized powers of evil shall not prevail against the organized society which represents my teaching.'"¹¹⁶ John Dublin followed by pointing out that there is

¹⁰⁹ M. Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," *Luther's Works* (ed. E. W. Gritsch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 41.10.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 41.12.

¹¹¹ M. Luther, "Against the Roman Papacy, An Institution of the Devil," *Luther's Works* (ed. Gritsch) 41.301.

¹¹² H. Bullinger, *On the Holy Catholic Church* (LCC 24.294).

¹¹³ J. Calvin, *Commentary on 2 Tim 1:12* (LCC 23.236).

¹¹⁴ J. Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1974) 2.186-187.

¹¹⁵ A. Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on St. Matthew's Gospel* (London: Robert Scott, 1909) 230.

¹¹⁶ W. C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew* (3d ed.; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1912) 176.

no known eastern manner of speech that justifies speaking of "powers" as "gates." Nevertheless Dublin proposed that the idiom be understood as describing the Church in attack on Hades whose gates cannot resist the attack. He suggested that the idea is expressed in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* of the second century. Dublin, taking Matt 7:25–27 as his departure point, conjectures in the absence of any textual support that *pylai* must be a corruption and proposes *pēgai hadou* ("fountains of Hades"). For support he projects there being a Greek corruption from such a word as *ʔūbal* (Dan 8:2) meaning "river," which the LXX rendered *pylē* ("gate"), the Vg as *portain*, and the Douay as "gate."

A second conjecture of Dublin works from *šaʿar* and obtains *šaʿar* ("storm"; Isa 28:2), which some MSS and some printed texts mistakenly read as *šaʿar* ("gate").¹¹⁷ Dublin suggests that the Aramaic translator made a similar confusion. Dublin's conjectures have not commended themselves.

Scholars have engaged in limitless discussion in their attempt to define an antecedent for the pronoun *autēs* ("it") in Matt 16:18c. Some have contended that Jesus is promising that the worst "hell can do" will never destroy the Church. They see Jesus promising that the Church is eternal.¹¹⁸ Still others find Jesus promising that even his death cannot prevail against the building of the Church by keeping him captive.

T. H. Robinson gives expression to the first of these views as having been abundantly fulfilled:

The great racial movements of the fifth century overthrew the political world, but the church adapted herself to the new conditions, and still went on her way. A thousand years later came that intellectual revolution which we call the Renaissance, and though it so completely uprooted the whole world of medieval thought that we to-day find it almost impossible to think ourselves into the position of the fourteenth century, the church found a new life, and both that portion of it which, in northern Europe, broke away from the main body, and those who maintained the traditional forms, won a fresh vigour and a new interpretation of Christ. The *powers of Hades* have not prevailed against it.¹¹⁹

R. C. H. Lenski presented the linguistically and historically indefensible case that Hades here must mean "hell," the abode of devils whose object is to destroy the Church. For him, hell's gates would pour out her hosts to attack the Church.¹²⁰

L. E. Sullivan (rebutting Lagrange's claim that "gates" designates "powers" that are unsuccessfully aggressive against the Church that is established on Peter) claims that "gates of a city" in Scripture are by me-

¹¹⁷ J. Dublin, "The Gates of Hades," *The Expositor* 11 (June 1916) 401–409.

¹¹⁸ R. Eppel, "L'interprétation de Matthieu 16:18b," *Aux sources de la tradition chrétienne. Mélanges offerts à M. Maurice Goguel* (Neuchâtel/Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1950) 71–73, proposed a reconstruction in which *šōʿarē* is read instead of *šaʿarē*, giving in Greek *pyloroi* as in Job 38:17. In this way the guardians of Hades become an aggressive force.

¹¹⁹ T. H. Robinson, *The Gospel of Matthew* (MNTC; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928) 141.

¹²⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1943) 628.

tonymy the resisting forces of a city in siege. He proposed that the image be reversed, making the Church the attacking force under which the gates of hell will not stand up. No linguistic or historical defense of his proposal is offered, but he saw in it the possibility of shifting from a defensive concept of the Church to an offensive position.¹²¹

Questions needing to be asked about the attack proposal in an atomic age with nuclear weapons considered as the gates of hell are raised in an editorial by John Drury.¹²²

Yet another way of dealing with Matt 16:18c is seen when J. Jeremias asserts that in Jewish Greek the verb *katishyein* plus the genitive is always active, meaning "to vanquish."¹²³ Hence he asserts that in Matt 16:18 the gates of Hades are attacking the Church.

C. K. Barrett considers that the "gates of Hades" are the forces of the underworld in general (Satan and his minions) or perhaps the power of death. He rejects the idea of the Church's being unharmed age after age in favor of the eschatological community's weathering the last desperate attacks of evil before the end.¹²⁴

Joel Marcus, after projecting an antithesis between gates of Hades and unmentioned gates of heaven in Matt 16:19, summarizes the case for the phrase suggesting an attack:

In the age inaugurated by Jesus' death and resurrection, the gates of the underworld will swing open and the horrors of the pit will erupt onto the earth with a roar, attacking everything on it—including the church—with unbridled fury. In the midst of this peril, however, Peter will be given the keys that unlock the gates of heaven. Those gates, too, will swing open, and the kingly power of God (*basileia tōn ouranōn*) will break forth from heaven to enter the arena against the demons. Hades will not prevail against the church because God will be powerfully at work in it, revealing his purposes for it and imparting the heavenly power to fulfill those purposes, so that his will is done on earth as it is in heaven (6:10).¹²⁵

Marcus, by the type of argument known in rabbinic discussion as *asmakta*, joins "rock" in Matt 16:18 with "rock" in 7:24–25 and deduces that as the storm beats on the latter rock, so the rock of 16:18 is under attack. He then makes "gates" a metonymy for the city itself. By appealing to the Greek version of Ps 24:7, which has the apostrophe "Lift up your heads, you gates" rendered as "You princes, lift up the gates," Marcus makes the city represent the inhabitants, especially the demonic rulers. By this chain he finds the rulers of the underworld bursting forth from the gates of their heavily-guarded, walled city to attack God's people on earth. He finds this

¹²¹ L. E. Sullivan, "The Gates of Hell (Mt. 16:18)," *TS* 10 (1949) 62–64.

¹²² J. Drury, "The Gates of Hell," *Theology* 85 (March 1982) 81–83.

¹²³ J. Jeremias, "*pylē*," *TDNT* 6.926.

¹²⁴ C. K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry, and Sacraments in the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1985) 17.

¹²⁵ J. Marcus, "The Gates of Hades and the Keys of the Kingdom (Matt 16:18–19)," *CBQ* 50 (July 1988) 455.

picture parallel to that found in Jewish apocalyptic.¹²⁶ The case is more astute than convincing. 1QH 3:17–18 claimed in support of the attack is a reconstructed text in which the crucial relevant words have been supplied. The text has *ša'ārê*, but the next words are lacking: "They open the gates [of Sheol for all] acts of wickedness."

A Lutheran-Catholic study group found "gates" to require a synecdoche reading as "gatekeepers" or "powers."¹²⁷ The NAB note on Matt 16:18 says "nether world (Greek *Hades*, the abode of the dead) is conceived of as a walled city whose gates will not close in upon the church of Jesus, i.e., it will not be overcome by the powers of death."

Stephen Gero notes that the Syriac text attests "bars" instead of "gates." He finds the word possibly meaning "lever" and conjectures that the passage is saying that Hades cannot dislodge the rock on which the Church is built. He considers the rock to be Peter.¹²⁸

It is likely that the modern English-speaking person is influenced by the lyrics of Sabine Baring-Gould's song "Onward Christian Soldiers" as much as, if not more than, by Matt 16:18: "Gates of Hell can never / 'Gainst that church prevail; / We have Christ's own promise, / And that cannot fail." When the song was written under the influence of the KJV, "hell" meant the realm of the dead. But that is no longer true. The vocabulary has changed, but theology has ignored it.

W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., survey twelve conflicting opinions on the interpretation of Matt 16:18c of which they prefer the case presented by Jeremias for an eschatological assault on the Church.¹²⁹

This long exposition of material, much of which is what Colin Brown designated "a hermeneutic without exegesis,"¹³⁰ suggests to me that current theologians ought to take notice of the change that has taken place in the English language that now makes a distinction between "Hades" and "hell." If one wants to expound a teaching that all that hell can do will never overcome the Church, that is well and good. But Matt 16:18c should not be twisted into being considered a prooftext for it.

I find more convincing than all these proposals the case presented by A. H. McNeile and more recently stated by F. Filson and D. Hill. It points out that Hades is not regarded as the abode of evil powers that emerge to attack people.¹³¹ In keeping with the linguistic data, "gates of Hades" is to

¹²⁶ Ibid. 444–446.

¹²⁷ *Peter in the New Testament* (ed. K. P. Donfried and J. Reumann; Minneapolis/New York: Augsburg/Paulist, 1973) 90 n. 208.

¹²⁸ S. Gero, "The Gates and the Bars of Hades? A Note on Matthew 16:18," *NTS* 27 (April 1981) 415–416.

¹²⁹ W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1991) 630–632.

¹³⁰ C. Brown, "The Gates of Hell: An Alternative Approach," *SBL 1987 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholar's, 1987) 358; "The Gates of Hell and the Church," *Church, Word and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley* (ed. J. E. Bradley and R. A. Miller; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 20.

¹³¹ A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1915) 242; F. V. Filson, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (HNTC; New York: Harper, 1960) 187; D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCB; London: Oliphants) 261.

be considered a figure of speech for death, which cannot keep the Christ imprisoned. Of early writers, Eusebius uses Matt 16:18 as an equivalent of “gates of death.”¹³² Three verses further on in Matthew the disciples are plainly informed of the impending death and resurrection of Christ. Peter spoke of it on the day of Pentecost: “But God raised him up, having freed him from death because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (Acts 2:24). “He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption” (2:34). Paul declares: “Death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom 6:9).

¹³² Eusebius *Preparation of the Gospel* 1.3.11 (GCS 43.1.12–13).