



## Controversy over “Binding” & “Loosing”: A Legalistic Concept Taught by Schools of Shammai & Hillel; Stressed Oral Tradition & Ignored the Gospel

18. The keys to the kingdom of the heavens are the Gospel of salvation which Peter so accurately stated in verse 16. He has been delegated the power to use these keys to open the doors of the kingdom.
19. The kingdom to which he has the keys is an entirely new aspect of God’s vast domain that includes both heaven and earth. This is the mystery doctrine of the “spiritual house” and Peter has the power to enable whosoever will to make the transition from the spiritual life of the dispensation of Israel over to the spiritual life of the new dispensation of the Church.
20. Only Peter has these keys and so only Peter is invested with this power to open the doors of the “spiritual house” which is the body of Christ.
21. The commission involves binding and loosing and the proper translation of the last part of verse 19 is critical to understanding this entire passage. Here it is again:

**Matthew 16:19b -** “... and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

22. What on earth does this mean? Well, it appears to be quite nebulous but there is only one way to hash it out and that is through exegesis.
23. Our analysis is going to have to establish (1) the antecedent of the neuter relative pronoun “whatever,” (2) the meaning of “bind” and “loose,” and (3) the meaning of “bound” and “loosed.”
24. We will start with the verbs beginning with the aorist active subjunctive of the verb:

**δέω, δεῶ -** “to bind,” “to chain” or “to imprison.”

This verb is paired up in our passage with the aorist active subjunctive of the verb:

**λύω, λυῶ -** “to loose,” “release,” “to break down a wall.”

- (1) These two words taken together mean “to bind and to loose” which was a phrase used by the rabbis of the first century with regard to the Halakah, a term that refers to the rules of conduct the first century Jewish theologians interpreted from the Talmud. Thus the Halakah was an oral commentary on the Mosaic Law.
- (2) The Halakah is the legal framework of Jewish tradition. It was in essence a set of oral traditions that sought to regulate the day-to-day life and conduct of the Jewish people. During the Incarnation there were two schools of thought on the application of these rules. One school was founded by rabbinic scholar, Shammai \shām' m□ \, while the other was established by another rabbinic scholar, Hillel \hill' e□ \. A summary of these two men is important to our study:

**Ben-Asher, Naomi and Hayim Leaf (eds.). *The Junior Jewish Encyclopaedia*. 14<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Shengold Publishers, 1996), 281, 146:**



**Shammai.** Talmudic scholar of the first century B.C. He was the contemporary and rival of Hillel and founder of a school named after him. Hillel was president of the Sanhedren, Shammai, the vice-president. The Talmud records a number of differences of opinion between Hillel and Shammai. In most instances, Shammai and his followers were more strict in their interpretation of the law. The opinions of the School of Hillel were accepted by the sages. The stories about Shammai reveal an inflexible personality. Shammai and Hillel were the last of the scholars whose teachings formed the basis for the Talmud. (p. 281)

**Hillel.** (First century B.C.) He became the leader of the Pharisees and head of the liberal school of interpretation of the Jewish law. He established regulations which were aimed at reconciling the ancient law with new conditions. King Herod appointed him head of the Sanhedrin. He remained spiritual leader of the Jews for a period of forty years.

As contrasted with his great opponent Shammai, Hillel stands out as the liberal interpreter of Jewish law, as well as one of the foremost authorities of the Talmud. (p. 146)

- (3) We learn more about how these two men and their theologies pertain to our passage from:

**Carson, Daniel A. "Matthew." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin (gen. ed.). (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1984), 8:372:**

The rabbis spoke of "binding" and "loosing" in terms of laying down Halakah (rules of conduct): Shammai is strict and "binds" many things on the people, while Hillel allows greater laxity and "looses" them. It might be argued, then, that in Acts 15:10 Peter looses what certain Judaizers want to bind.

- (4) The verse referenced by Dr. Carson is Peter's remark regarding the false doctrine that believing Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be saved. The issue is raised in:

**Acts 15:1 -** And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

- (5) This false doctrine led to a conference in Jerusalem that included Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, and other apostles and pastors. Also present was a group of believers who were former Pharisees and who were obviously graduates of the strict school of Shammai. Their opinion is recorded in:

**Acts 15:5 -** But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them [ **the Gentiles** ], and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses [ **the Halakah** ]."

- (6) During the debate Peter makes the following points in:

**Acts 15:10 -** "Why do you [ **believer Pharisees** ] put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples [ **Gentile believers** ] a yoke which neither our fathers nor we [ **Jewish believers** ] have been able to bear [ **not even the Jews were ever able to keep the Law totally** ]?"

- (7) What Peter is actually recommending is that the Gentiles be loosed from the requirement of circumcision, not bound by it, since it was inconsequential with regard to salvation.
- (8) Carson concludes his comments by observing that whereas the discussion in Acts 15 has to do with "binding and loosing" with regard to rules, the subject in Matthew 16:19 is in reference to persons. The neuter singular pronoun **ὅς, hos** refers to a class of persons and is best translated "whoever" rather than "whatever."



- (9) Consequently, the Lord included in Peter's commission a phrase that contrasts what Peter was to bind and loose with the traditions of men espoused by the schools of Shammai and Hillel.
- (10) Shammai recommended binding people to the Law in a strict legalistic sense. Hillel, on the other hand, loosed them from a strict interpretation of the Law but replaced it with humanitarianism and works.
- (11) Both missed the point. In fact, a delegation of Pharisees had just recently challenged the Lord with regard to these very traditions and the disciples including Peter were witnesses to the exchange recorded in:

**Matthew 15:1** - Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying,

**v. 2** - "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders [ **the Halakah** ]? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread [ **tractate Yadaim, 2:1** ]?"

**v. 3** - And Jesus answered and said to them, "And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God [ **the Mosaic Law** ] for the sake of your tradition [ **the Halakah** ]?"

- (12) This same event is also described by Mark in:

**Mark 7:8** - "Neglecting the commandment of God [ **the Mosaic Law** ], you hold to a tradition of men [ **the Halakah** ]."

**v. 9** - He was also saying to them, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God [ **the Mosaic Law** ] in order to keep your tradition [ **the Halakah** ]."

**v. 11** - Invalidating the Word of God [ **the Mosaic Law** ] by your tradition [ **the Halakah** ] which you have handed down [ **orally** ]; and you do many things such as that."

- (13) Paul confesses his involvement in this very issue when he was a Pharisee:

**Galatians 1:13** - You have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it;

**Galatians 1:14** - and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions [ **the Halakah** ].

- (14) Paul admonishes us to avoid being entangled in traditions since they are deceptions designed to distract us from the Word of God in:

**Colossians 2:8** - See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men [ **false doctrines that emerge from human viewpoint** ], according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

- (15) All of these passages either reference or include the oral tradition of first-century-A.D. Judaism. This is clarified by:

**Carson, Daniel A. "Matthew." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 8:348:**



**Matthew 15:2.** The “traditions of the elders,” and the “tradition of men” refer to the great corpus of oral teaching that commented on the law and interpreted it in detailed rules of conduct. The tradition in Jesus’ time was largely oral and orally transmitted; but the Pharisees viewed it as having authority very nearly equal to the canon. It was later codified under Rabbi Judah the Prince (c. A.D. 135-200) to form the Mishnah.

- (16) The Lord’s criticism of the Pharisees’ emphasis on the oral tradition is designed to point out that they are emphasizing minor details of tradition while at the same time ignoring the major fact that He is their Messiah.
- (17) As a result these men, as spiritual leaders of Judaism, were unable to profess before the people of Judea that Jesus of Nazareth was their long-expected Messiah. The Lord addresses this point in:

**Matthew 23:13 -** “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

**Matthew 23:15 -** “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one convert; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

- (18) A similar passage is found in Luke 11:52 where the Lord addresses the lawyers who accompany the Pharisees. Experts in the oral traditions, they may have included the scribes but not necessarily, thus the general term νομικός, *nomikos* is used:

**Luke 11:52 -** “Woe to you lawyers [ νομικός, *nomikos* ]! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered.”

- (19) By their flawed analysis of the Scripture, these “experts” make it impossible for their students to accept the reality of Who Jesus of Nazareth really is. They won’t enter the kingdom and neither will their charges.