John 20:22b–23: “The Forgiveness of Sins and the Power to Overcome Them”—A Lexical and Exegetical Study

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Most if not all currently used translations of John 20:23 interpret the Greek word κρατέω as meaning that forgiveness may be retained or withheld. The apostles, or the ecclesiological authority equipped with their commission in the church, may choose not to forgive sinners their wrongdoings. The forgiveness or unforgiveness of the sinners is mediated through the church's leaders. Often the background of the passage has been connected to the Synoptic Gospel teachings on binding and loosing (Matt 16:19). The righteous individual or the Christian community's leadership may permit or disallow personal conduct, and designate what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior. In John 20:23 the Greek word κρατέω is given the lexical meaning of to “pronounce the sins unforgiven.” This lexical and exegetical study will provide compelling evidence to re-examine this meaning. The Greek verb which occurs twice in John 20:23, κρατήτε κεκράτηται should be understood in the more basic meaning of the term. It refers to the meaning, “to overcome obstacles” or “to seize control,” which more likely means that the sinner is empowered to overcome sinful behavior.

Forgiveness of sins in the first pronouncement of John 20:23 is followed by empowerment to overcome sins. In fact, the church and the synagogue have understood forgiveness in extremely distinctive ways. Arguably Jewish and Christian views of forgiveness make up some of the most divergent components of these two sister faiths rooted in the rich common heritage of Second Temple period Judaism. The church has sometimes sought to mediate forgiveness for sin. The synagogue has more often required reconciliation with the person wronged as a foundation for divine forgiveness. A fresh exegetical study of John 20:23 will demonstrate the parallel structure and meaning between the first pronouncement, that the individual is forgiven of sins, and the second pronouncement, which actually teaches that the individual is empowered to
overcome sinful conduct. As a result, the two pronouncements form a synonymous parallelism.

Translation and Analysis

The NRSV follows the standard rendering of the final phrase. The verse reads, “When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’” In a similar way, the NASB translates the final pronouncement, “If you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.” Here it is worth noting that the only example of κρατέω being translated this way to mean “to retain sins” in the revised Bauer Greek-English Lexicon is John 20:23.1 I have been unable to find this exact meaning of the verb anywhere.2 Arguably it is a specialized meaning forced on this verse. On the other hand, the verb is used extensively in Greek with the other meanings, “to overcome obstacles” or “to seize control.” The verse is better understood with the more accepted and widely documented definition of the verb. For instance, when Judas is betraying Jesus he tells the Roman soldiers how to identify his rabbi, “The one I kiss is the man; seize him and lead him away under guard” (RSV). So the verb can convey the idea of taking a prisoner into custody. In Heb 4:14, the verb appears with the idea of holding fast the confession of faith, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession” (RSV). The faithful disciple maintains control over the confession of faith. In Rev 2:25, the one who holds fast is the individual who conquers wrong and keeps the faith unto the end. Jesus says, “Only hold fast what you have, until I come. He who conquers and keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations” (RSV). Moreover, Rev 7:1 describes the angel who has the strength to overcome the four winds of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree” (RSV).

2 The closest parallel is not even a derivative of κρατέω. The preposition διά is added to form the verb τηρέω and it is used in Ben Sira 27:30–28:1, noted by P. Billerbeck, Das Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch (6 vols.; Munich: Beck, 1978), 2:585; and discussed by R. Bultmann, The Gospel of John (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 692–3. The evil person who holds on tight to anger will have his or her iniquities preserved.