

Peter's denial of Christ

(John 18:15-18,25-27)

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John 18:15-18,25-27 (NAS):

15 And Simon Peter was following Jesus, and {so was} another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest,

16 but Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought in Peter.

17 The slave-girl therefore who kept the door said to Peter, "You are not also {one} of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not."

18 Now the slaves and the officers were standing {there,} having made a charcoal fire, for it was cold and they were warming themselves; and Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.

25 Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They said therefore to him, "You are not also {one} of His disciples, are you?" He denied {it} and said, "I am not."

26 One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?"

27 Peter therefore denied {it} again; and immediately a cock crowed.

PART 1

1.1 Introduction

Just seven, very well known verses. Peter's three-fold denial of Christ in the house of the High Priest has to be understood within the larger context of Peter's role in the events leading to Christ's crucifixion, and secondly of his calling and personality more generally. These will therefore be explored in detail.

1.2 What happened?: The gospel accounts compared

Although we are looking particularly at John's account, it is useful first to consider the variations of the story as we have it in the gospels.

Peter's denial is also recorded in Matthew 26:58,69-75, Mark 14:51-54, 66-72, Luke 22:54-62. This event is therefore amongst the relatively few events that are recorded in all four gospels. The details of the four accounts differ in significant respects, and it is worth comparing them.

Luke 22:54-62 (NAS)	Matt 26:58, 69-75 (NAS)	Mark 14:51-54,66-72 (NAS)	John 18:15-18,25-27 (NAS)
		51 And a certain young man was following Him, wearing {nothing but} a linen sheet over {his} naked {body;} and they seized him. 52 But he left the linen sheet behind, and escaped naked.	

<p>54a And having arrested Him, they led Him {away,} and brought Him to the house of the high priest;</p>		<p>53 And they led Jesus away to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes gathered together.</p>	
<p>54b but Peter was following at a distance.</p>	<p>58a But Peter also was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest,</p>	<p>54 And Peter had followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest;</p>	<p>15 And Simon Peter was following Jesus, and {so was} another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, 16 but Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought in Peter.</p>
<p>55 And after they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter was sitting among them.</p>	<p>58b and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome. 69a Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard,</p>	<p>54b and he was sitting with the officers, and warming himself at the fire. 66a And as Peter was below in the courtyard,</p>	
<p>56 And a certain servant-girl, seeing him as he sat in the firelight, and looking intently at him, said, "This man was with Him too."</p>	<p>69b and a certain servant-girl came to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean."</p>	<p>66b one of the servant-girls of the high priest came, 67 and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him. and said.</p>	<p>17a The slave-girl therefore who kept the door said to Peter, "You are not also {one} of this man's disciples, are you?"</p>

		"You, too, were with Jesus the Nazarene."	
57 But he denied {it,} saying, "Woman, I do not know Him."	70 But he denied {it} before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." 71a And when he had gone out to the gateway,	68 But he denied {it,} saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." And he went out onto the porch.	17b He said, "I am not."
			18 Now the slaves and the officers were standing {there,} having made a charcoal fire, for it was cold and they were warming themselves; and Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.
58 And a little later, another saw him and said, "You are {one} of them too!"	71b another {servant-girl} saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth."	69 And the maid saw him, and began once more to say to the bystanders, "This is {one} of them!"	25 Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They said therefore to him, "You are not also {one} of His disciples, are you?"
58b But Peter said, "Man, I am not!"	72 And again he denied {it} with an oath, "I do not know the man."	70a But again he was denying it.	25b He denied {it} and said, "I am not."
59 And after about an hour had passed, another man {began} to insist, saying, "Certainly this man also was	73 And a little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are {one} of them: for	70b And after a little while the bystanders were again saying to Peter, "Surely you are {one} of them. for	26 One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, said, "Did I not see you in the garden with

with Him, for he is a Galilean too."	the way you talk gives you away."	you are a Galilean too."	Him?"
60a But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about."	74a Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!"	71 But he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this man you are talking about!"	27a Peter therefore denied {it} again;
60b And immediately, while he was still speaking, a cock crowed.	74b And immediately a cock crowed.	72a And immediately a cock crowed a second time.	27b and immediately a cock crowed.
61a And the Lord turned and looked at Peter.			
61b And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had told him, "Before a cock crows today, you will deny Me three times."	75a And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, "Before a cock crows, you will deny Me three times."	72b And Peter remembered how Jesus had made the remark to him, "Before a cock crows twice, you will deny Me three times."	
62 And he went out and wept bitterly.	75b And he went out and wept bitterly.	72c And he began to weep.	

The essential features of the accounts are same in all of them. Jesus was led to the house of the high priest. The synoptics agree Peter followed at a distance and entered the courtyard. John adds that "another disciple" who knew the high priest obtained his entry. Until then Peter had been hanging about outside. This other disciple is often assumed, without the support of any Biblical evidence, to be John (who is usually assumed always to be "the disciple whom Jesus loved"). For this passage at least, such an identification seems most unlikely, since John, a Galilean who had been with Jesus for three years, would have been no more likely to know the high priest than Peter. John was also amongst the disciples who fled from the garden.

Whoever it was, could not only get into the courtyard without exciting comment, and had a right to be there, but on sufficiently familiar terms with the high priest to be able to negotiate with the young woman door-keeper to get Peter into the courtyard. He was someone who was there regularly: we shall see later that he was John's witness, and familiar with the details of the high priest's household. Perhaps he was one of the "secret disciples", such as were Joseph of Arimathea, or Nicodemus, but as they are both named later in John's account it was most probably not them. There may have been good reason for the anonymity. We cannot rule out the possibility that the "another disciple" might even have been a woman - indeed it is likely, as the negotiation to get Peter into the courtyard took place with a young servant girl: Jewish men generally avoided interacting with women (see John 4:9,27).

John 18:16 provides an important detail, by suggesting that Peter stood outside and so did not enter the courtyard of his own volition, and hence would not be comfortable there. Unfamiliar circumstances are threatening and uncomfortable, and few people behave well in them, even when the genuine threats are limited. Here the pressures were considerable.

The synoptics record that Peter was warming himself before the fire before he was challenged by the servant girl, as a result of which Peter goes out into the gateway (Mark & Luke). John appears to place this encounter soon after he enters the gate. These accounts can probably be reconciled because the whole sequence of events took a long time, long enough to end at dawn when the cock crowed, making various toings and froings possible.

All the accounts agree that Peter was standing with the slaves and officers of the high priest warming himself, and we may assume Peter was trying to be lost in the crowd, and trying not to be conspicuous. This was difficult since he was a stranger with no plausible reason for being there, and with an easily recognised Galilean accent. This was a very uncomfortable position for Peter to find himself in, and few people perform well in such circumstances. He is defenceless in the middle of the enemy camp, with nothing to do. The other disciple has drawn Peter into a situation where he is out of his depth, and consequently very vulnerable. We should not underestimate the risk Peter is taking: Jesus has been arrested on a charge of treason, and as Jesus's follower, Peter could be arrested on the same charges. Peter is free only because Jesus secured the freedom of his disciples as a condition of giving himself up (John 18:8).

The first challenge differs in form between the accounts, but the essence is the same, a young slave girl asks Peter whether he is one of Jesus' disciples. This seems to have taken place relatively privately, and the challenge comes from someone who

poses relatively little threat, a young girl with little power. The form of her question is hesitant, using a form of words that expects a negative answer, which makes it easier for Peter to deny than affirm. Peter takes the route the questioned steered him towards, and denies it, with each writer giving a different expression to his denial.

The second challenge, in a very similar form but in a more public context, comes from the same maid (Luke), another maid (Matt, Mark), or from the general company around the fire (John). One may imagine that these accounts represent a coherent story, with the girl who challenged him before starting the challenge and the men around her then following it up. This was a more pressured situation than the first challenge. Peter denies Jesus again, Mark adding that the denial was with an oath.

The third challenge is made by a man, and is far more immediately threatening to Peter's personal safety. Note how the temptations have become ever more difficult to handle. The synoptics say the challenge is that Peter is a disciple, because he was a Galilean, on account of his accent. John differs, the person making it being a relative of the slave who had his ear cut off by Peter earlier, and his challenge is that Peter had been in the garden. That was very threatening, for this man has a personal reason to hate him. Perhaps both challenges arose in quick succession, and what is recorded depends what the witnesses saw, and what they knew about the high priest's household staff.

John's source clearly knew the high priest's household well, he knew the status and job of the girl servant and the personal relationships between people in the household. This witness was an onlooker, most probably the "another disciple" who got Peter into the courtyard, whilst the other accounts, all essentially the same, express themselves more vaguely about the personalities, and probably derive from Peter's own account. Luke and Mark record Peter cursing and swearing his denial, and events after Peter left – his weeping, which John does not record.

Thus Peter experiences escalating challenges, starting in private from an individual of little importance, but becoming ever more public and threatening. Having begun, the repeated denials seem inevitable.

All the gospels agree that a cock then crowed: in Luke's account it was the second crowing. John's account ends there, suggesting that John's witness did not know what happened thereafter. Matthew records that Jesus turned to look at Peter – which can only come from Peter, and the synoptics record Jesus's prophecy, and that Peter wept, Matthew and Mark recording that Peter went out to weep.

In conclusion it would seem that there are two (main) witnesses for the gospel accounts. Matthew, Mark and Luke record essentially the same events, and the record is probably Peter's own account, since they recounts his weeping, which took place after he went out. Much of John's account reads much more like that of an onlooker, almost certainly the "other disciple", who was familiar with the personalities and occupations of the high priest's household. John's witness recorded how Peter entered the courtyard, knew who the household staff are (John 18:10, 16-17,26), more distantly noticed the second challenge but not how it began, but did not know what Peter did after the third denial, because he lost sight of Peter when he went out. These facts provide strong evidence for two independent witnesses of what took place, so strongly establishing the full historicity of these events.

We can only fail if we try to do something. More so than the synoptic gospels, John provides insight into the causes of Peter's failure. Peter failed because he had good motives, but lacked the ability to perform. He was out of his depth. He was drawn into an impossible situation by the other disciple, who was undoubtedly well intentioned. That other disciple had the faith and the "contacts" to be "comfortable" in that situation, which Peter did not have, so was uncomfortable, and should not have been there. Peter had initially stood outside, and that is where he should have stayed.

This passage has a lot to teach us about what happens if we act beyond our measure of faith (Romans 14:22), perhaps, like Peter, locked in by our earlier words (John 13:37), and so end up in a situation for which we are unprepared. When we are spiritually uncomfortable, failure, even denial, is almost inevitable. No wonder we need to pray, "Lead us not into temptation".

1.3 How Peter came into this place of temptation

Having looked in detail at the passage itself, and the psychology of the events in the courtyard, we need to understand why Peter became locked into this situation and so fail.

John 13:1 tells us that "Jesus knowing that his hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end". Peter mistakenly thought he could do the same as Jesus in John 13:36-38. Jesus answered Peter's question about where Jesus was going by telling him that he could not follow now. Peter refused to accept this, and said that he would lay down his life for Jesus. Jesus then prophesied Peter's denial.

We are at risk of expressing the same over confidence. I was once in a fellowship discussion about how we would act if presented with a certain difficult set of circumstances. Someone confidently expressed his opinion about how he would act, but others of us said that we could not know what we would do. These verses provide the justification for our agnosticism. We can have the desire and the zeal, as did Peter, but we cannot guarantee the performance. Events test where we really are, and whether we are relying on the Lord or our own strength.

Luke 22:28-34 usefully provides far more detail. Jesus acknowledges that his disciples have stood by Him in his trials (Luke 22:28), and promises them high places as judges within His kingdom (22:29-30). Peter had previously prevailed in many trials and stuck with Jesus, but that was not enough. Jesus reverts to using Peter's personal name Simon, which means "hearing". Jesus tells Simon that Satan has demanded permission to sift them (the "you" here is plural – hence including all the disciples) like wheat, but Jesus has prayed for Peter (the "you" in v32 are all in the singular) that his faith will not fail. And that when Peter has turned, he will strengthen the disciples. Satan did sift the disciples, they all ran away, they all failed, and the true character of Judas was revealed. Jesus prayed only for Simon, not for any of the other disciples, that his faith would not fail. If the faith of others fails then the general situation is recoverable, but not if Peter's fails. John 17:11-12 echoes the prayer in Luke 22 that Jesus made for Simon Peter, but Jesus extends the prayer to preserve the remaining eleven disciples, following the departure of Judas Iscariot.

But rather than face up to the truth of all this and listen – that Peter will have a dark period in his faith from which he will need to return – Peter insists that he will not fail. This makes it almost inevitable that he will not make the necessary preparations of heart, and so act beyond his faith when the "sifting" takes place.

Remember that Jesus's prophecy of Peter's denial in John 13:38 was not inevitable. The purpose of all such prophecy is to warn and encourage people to change their attitude and so avoid the predicted outcome. Warnings can be heeded and the outcome changed, but Peter does not recognise his weakness and his need to overcome. His other experiences, such as when he walked on the water and began to sink should have warned him. He needed to rely on the Lord as his strength.

We see Peter's unpreparedness develop in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-45). Jesus took Peter, James and John beyond the other disciples to pray. These three are within earshot of Jesus, and He wants them to pray, to **watch**, with Him. But the disciples fell asleep. Jesus rebukes Peter, not the rest of the disciples, about their failure to watch. All of them needed

to persist in watching and praying because although their spirits were willing their flesh was weak. Peter's desire was strong, but he lacked the strength to perform. Had he prayed, he could have had God's strength to fulfil his desire to stand firm. But instead of strengthening himself by fervent prayer, Peter, and the disciples with him, fell asleep twice more in the garden. This left them all unprepared when the betrayer arrived.

This happened shortly afterwards, as recounted in John 18:1-12. Note again, in passing how John's witness knows the name of the High Priest's servant who had his ear cut off (v10).

Jesus is the one in control of the situation. A large number of soldiers had been deployed, but they fell back before Jesus (v6). Jesus intended in v8, that if the authorities agreed to let the disciples go, there should be no conflict. The provision of the swords, which Jesus had earlier commanded, was against the eventuality that the authorities failed to grant His request. Then there might have been a need to fight in order for the disciples to escape. Simon did not understand the plan. He takes the initiative, and is going to stand up for Jesus, even though the odds are overwhelming, and his swordsmanship limited. He lashes out, cutting off the high priest's servant's ear. No says Jesus, and another gospel tells us Jesus immediately restores the man's ear.

Imagine Peter's perplexity. Jesus has not put up a fight, but has given Himself up. This seems to represent the failure of all they have been working for. In this state of inner confusion, Peter follows Jesus, as Jesus is carried off. Peter has determined in his heart and declared himself as following Jesus to the end, locked himself in, and can't change his outlook fast enough to keep up with the way events are turning out.

How we need to be careful, for we too often lock ourselves in to a course of action, when Jesus has a better way, when we need to change to see the Lord's better way. Only by prayer can we change and see things from the divine standpoint.

We can't predict how we will behave. Peter was broken by his denial, but nevertheless his faith did not fail. He still remained the leader. He was the one who was called to go to the tomb on the day of resurrection. Peter continues to lead even when he leads them back to fishing John 21. His leadership role is not disrupted by these events.

He will have face to Jesus over his denial, and this is recorded in John 21. Jesus had “loved his own to the end”. But had Peter? Hence the three questions "Do you love me, Peter"? By this time, Peter knows that he does not have the power to "love to the end", as Jesus did (John 13:1). Both sides admit the basis of the relationship between them cannot be at the highest level, but only at the fallible human level. Peter will always be prone to failure, but God will use him. Peter is commissioned to feed the sheep and lambs.

Strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit that fell upon them at Pentecost, he takes the lead in proclaiming the unpalatable message that his hearers had murdered God’s messiah. Likewise he is fearless when tried before the Sanhedron (Acts 3 and 4). He is the one who leads the church, bringing the Holy Spirit to the Jews (Acts 2), Samaritans (Acts 8), and Gentiles (Acts 10). He became the leadership heavily weight during the foundational phase of church development.

PART 2

The character and role of Peter among the disciples, as revealed in the gospels

Jesus thought Peter a special person. Peter was initially pulled into Jesus’ orbit by his brother Andrew (John 1:41). He was a fisherman, with his brother and fellow disciple Andrew, and he came from Galilee (Matthew 4:18, Mark 1:16), more precisely from Bethsaida (John 1:44). After preaching from his boat, Jesus commanded him to let down the nets for a catch, and on obtaining the – unexpected – rich haul, Peter said, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:4-8). And Jesus said to Peter, and only to Peter, that henceforth he would catch men (Luke 5:10).

Peter was first among the apostles:

- "The first, Simon, who is called Peter" (Matthew 10:2) "he named Peter" (i.e. a stone, a rock) , (Luke 6:14), called Cephas (the Aramaic for a stone, a rock) (John 1:42) (Today we might use the modern American chat show host title of "anchor man") In Matthew 16:17 Jesus referred to him as Simon bar Jonah, which translated means "Hearing, son of the dove". These were his characteristics – Peter was the one who was hearing from the Holy Spirit, so when Peter confessed that Jesus was Messiah, Jesus replied that this was not revealed to him by men, but by His Father in heaven. This qualified him to lead.

- Right from the beginning, Peter was the one whom others followed in order to seek Jesus (Mark 1:36)
- All disciples were sifted, but Jesus prayed for Peter alone that his faith might not fail and when he had turned again he was to strengthen the brethren (Luke 22:31-32)
- Peter is the one called to the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene (John 20:2-6). He was the first to enter the tomb (Luke 24:12), and other people reported that the Lord had risen and appeared to Simon (Luke 24:34)
- Peter was restored and commissioned as the leader of the early church (John 21:15-17)
- In the early chapters of Acts Peter led the church and was no longer fearful.

Peter was in an inner two with John: they prepared the Passover (Luke 22:8)

Peter was one of the leading three (Peter John, and James)

- They saw the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1ff, Mark 9:2ff; Luke 9:28ff), and they fell asleep there (Luke 9:32)
- They were taken to pray in garden of Gethsemane where they also fell asleep (Matthew 26:37, Mark 14:33), but Peter, being the leader over the other two, and the one at risk of denying his Lord, was the one chided when they fell asleep (Matthew 26:40, Mark 14:37)
- They attended the healing of the ruler's daughter in Luke's account (Luke 8:51)

Peter was one of the leading four (Peter, John, James and Andrew)

- They entered the house after synagogue (Mark 1:29)
- They were present when Jesus healed the synagogue ruler's daughter, according to Mark's account (Mark 5:37: only leading three are recorded as present in Luke)
- They together asked questions about the temple (Mark 13:3)

Peter was the leader, revealed in his role as spokesman for the rest of the disciples:

- "Declare to us this parable" (Matthew 15:15)

- "Are you addressing this parable to us, or all?" (Luke 12:41)
- "Lord how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" (Matthew 18:21ff)
- "Behold we have forsaken all and followed you, what then shall we have" (Matthew 19:27, Mark 10:28, Luke 18:28). Again this reveals Peter's total commitment.
- He suggests making tents on the mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:4, Mark 9:5, Luke 9:33)
- "Rabbi behold the fig tree that you cursed has withered" (Mark 11:21)
- Peter responded to Jesus' question "who touched me" (Luke 8:45)
- When Jesus asks if the twelve also want to leave, Peter responds "Where shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68)
- Peter enquires through the "beloved disciple" (a strange action, why did he not ask Jesus directly?) about the betrayer (John 13:24ff)
- By his suggestion he takes other disciples fishing after the resurrection (John 21:2-3)

Peter was quick to speak and act. This went with his leadership role, of being to the fore, leading the others:

- He walked on water (Matthew 14:28,29).
- He promised the temple tax on behalf of Jesus (Matthew 17:24ff)
- He suggested making tents on mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:4, Mark 9:5, Luke 9:33)
- When Jesus rose to wash the disciples' feet, Peter was the one who firstly refused to let Jesus wash his feet, but when he was told that without such washing he would have no part with Jesus, then demanded that his hands and head also be washed (John 13:6-9). This response is so characteristic of Peter – he was also enthusiastic and wholehearted, dedicated to the kingdom of God, and wanted always to be at the centre of it.
- Peter said he would not deny, even if everyone else did (Matthew 26:33ff, Mark 14:29; Luke 22:33; John 13:37), which locked him in to denying the Lord (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 18)
- He smote high priest's servant's ear (John 18:10-11)
- He jumped into sea as soon as he realised that Jesus had appeared after the Resurrection (John 21:7)
- He displayed a tricky and impulsive attitude to "disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:21)

Peter was confessor that Jesus is Messiah (Matthew 16:16-18, Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20) as a result of which he was surnamed "Peter" (the rock, the "anchor man") (see also Mark 3:16), and given primacy amongst the apostles. Immediately afterwards, Peter sought to deflect Jesus from the cross, and thus became "Satan" (= adversary) to Jesus. (Matthew 16:22-23, Mark 8:32-33).

This explains why Jesus prayed especially for him, because the others would follow his lead. Being the leader he was the one who would get it wrong, as well as the one who would get it right. This mixture is the way it is with human leaders: they are useful because they are men of action but they make mistakes. Peter failed because he was a leader, a man of action, and the disciples' spokesman. He was the one "out in front". Jesus chose him as "anchor man". Never forget this when looking at his life. He was passionate for Jesus, for the cause of the kingdom of God, the enthusiastic follower, determined to keep the project afloat. He wasn't going to give up even when the odds became overwhelming, so he cut off the high priest's servant's ear, and followed Jesus into the enemy camp. That got Peter into a situation where he was out of his depth, and he denied the Lord. But his **faith** did not fail. Failure is recoverable, if your heart is wholly set to seek the Lord and do his will.

Peter was the leader, assisted by John and James. John and James were also men of action, since Jesus called them "sons of thunder". Only a few of the apostles turned out to be useful. They were not in the same league as Peter. All the rest of the disciples had run away, and Peter had to strengthen them.

Leadership is about vision to do something, and about taking risks. If you do something, you take a risk, and you may fail. God can cope with failure in someone who is totally committed.

As Hebrews 11 shows, God commends the man of faith because they do things, however imperfectly. God does not seem to value caution in leaders: he wants committed, risk taking, visionary achievers. They have their flaws, but God works around the flaws and uses them. God cannot use Laodicean lukewarmness, lack of commitment, apathy, and unwillingness to take risks (Revelation 3:14-19).

So Peter failed because of his **virtues**. That is why he remained useable, but he had to learn to rely on the power of God rather than himself.

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(The elders of Victoria Hall Christian Fellowship do not necessarily endorse the opinions expressed in this paper, which are entirely the responsibility of the author).

These notes not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author: R H Johnston (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk).
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