



Upon This Rock

One of my hobbies is to study and explore the culture, history and land of the Bible. I believe that understanding the cultural, historical and geographical settings of the biblical lands, enhances our understanding of the narrative of the Bible.

Today, I would love to take you on a journey. I want to take you to a picturesque place in the north of Israel, Banias. Banias is located at the southern foot of Mount Hermon at the headwaters of the Jordan River. The Banias Nature Reserve contains an abundance of natural and historical beauty, from the ruins of ancient cities to the massive Banias Waterfall – the biggest waterfall in Israel. The name Banias is actually an Arabic corruption of the word Pania or Paneus – of the Greek god Pan, half goat half man, god of the forests, shepherds and flocks. Pan was also known as a universal deity, appropriate for the name “Pan,” which means “all” in Greek.

The reality is that in the second century BC the place was called Panion because the Greek god Pan was worshiped there. Pan’s temple was the largest in the city. There people cut niches into the cliff of the rock to put statues of Pan and his nymph entourage. And they committed deplorable acts as worship to these false gods.

Pan’s temple was built in front of a massive cave with a deep spring that could never be measured. To the pagan mind, the cave led straight to the underworld, where fertility gods lived. People came from far and wide to worship Pan by throwing animal sacrifices into the water in this cave. If the animal vanished, the sacrifice was accepted. If blood surfaced in the spring, it was rejected. The cave was known throughout the region as the “gates of Hades,” or “gates of Hell”.

Later, Rome conquered the territory from Greek rulers. Augustus Caesar gave the city to Herod the Great, who, according to Josephus, “adorned this place, which was already a very remarkable one” with a “most beautiful temple of the whitest stone.”¹ When Herod died in 4 BC, his son Philip

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Caesarea Philippi,” Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 391.

received that region. Herod Philip rebuilt the city renaming Caesarea Philippi after himself making it his capital. Sadly, pagan worship continued there well into the third century AD. During Jesus' ministry, he visited Caesarea Philippi. This visit was a turning point in Jesus' ministry. From Caesarea Philippi, Jesus began his last journey to Jerusalem to be crucified. Six days after visiting Caesarea Philippi, Peter, James and John saw Jesus, Moses and Elijah transfigured "on a high mountain apart," (Matthew 17) the transfiguration.

Let me ask you, do you know what happened with Jesus and His disciples at Caesarea Philippi? What account of Jesus' life happened there? Take your bible and read Matthew 16:13-21 with those around you.

Countdown 2' Minutes

Jesus took His disciples up to the district of Caesarea Philippi, a Gentile region north of the Sea of Galilee. There, far from the multitudes that were always at His feet and within the geographical and worldview context of Caesarea Philippi that reflected the greco-Roman world, Jesus moved the journey with His disciples to a new and higher level. Clear than ever, Jesus opened up Himself, and presented the ministry and mission of His life before the disciple's eyes.

First Jesus prompted a discussion about His identity, about who He really was. In a center of pagan religion like Caesarea Philippi, where many deities were worshipped Jesus was introduced as Christ, "...the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16 NLT).

The word *christos*, where the word Christ comes from, which translates Hebrew Messiah, occurs about 350 times in the NT.² This word is not necessarily a name, but would be more a title. This title entails the concept of a specific office and function. Christ signifies Jesus' office as anointed Savior and alludes to His spiritual qualifications for the task of saving His people.

The title Christ goes against the pagan system of worship at Caesarea Philippi and throughout the Roman Empire. Our hope and trust cannot be built on anyone other than Christ. It's not about the Pan god that represents all the gods or nature, it is about the Christ, the Creator.

"Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through Him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see – such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through Him and for Him. He existed before anything else, and He holds all creation together." Colossians 1:15-17 NLT

² Marinus de Jonge, "Christ," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 914.

The Pan god was also the patron god of shepherds and flocks. But let me tell you that Christ, the Almighty God, the Creator, is also the caring, loving Good Shepherd.

"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." John 10:11 NASB

Jesus reveals not only who He is in Caesarea Philippi, but what He is supposed to do as the Christ and the Good Shepherd, surrender His life for us.

"From then on Jesus began to tell His disciples plainly that it was necessary for Him to go to Jerusalem, and that He would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day He would be raised from the dead." Matthew 16:21 NLT

Many sacrifices were offered to the gods at Caesarea Philippi. Maybe, as Jesus was sharing the mission of His life with the disciples, they were imagining someone offering a sacrifice at the cave in Caesarea Philippi. The sacrifices presented to the deities were intended to please the gods, to change their minds about a situation, or to seek their approval or blessing.

The pagan sacrifices offered to the gods at Caesarea Philippi and the sacrifice that Jesus would go through are totally different in nature and motivation. Do you see the difference? Take some time to discuss the distinction between the pagans sacrifice and Jesus' sacrifice, with those around you.

Countdown 2' Minutes

It was not the humans that would offer a sacrifice, but God, Christ, that would offer Himself as a sacrifice. The reason for this sacrifice, love. Only love. The result of this loving sacrifice, salvation. Salvation that would be available to anyone, anywhere. The only requirement for such a blessing, embracing Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

Based upon Himself, upon His sacrifice, what would Jesus build? "I will build My church" Matthew 16:18 NASB. Everyone that would accept Jesus and His sacrifice would be part of God's family, Jesus' Body, God's Ecclesia, God's church.

Caesarea Philippi was built on a rock where people's lives revolved around false gods, death, and demonic activity. Jesus, at Caesarea Philippi presented a new rock, where upon this rock, everyone should build their lives, and where His church would be built upon. There is a centuries-old debate about what Jesus meant by the phrase "on this rock I will build my church." Who is this rock? Well, I don't want to try to resolve such a discussion, but I want to let the Bible speak for

itself. So, take your Bible and read the following verses and see who the Bible, and even Peter, declares to be the rock! 1 Corinthians 3:10, 11; 1 Peter 2:4-8 and Ephesians 2:19-22.

3' Countdown

Jesus is the Christ, the Creator, the Loving Shepherd, the Sacrifice, the Rock, the Foundation and Sustainer of the Church. It's all about Jesus! It's all about Jesus! The church belongs to Jesus. The Christ is the foundation of His ecclesia. The movement of believers built upon the Rock, would proclaim and display the Good News about Jesus, and nothing, nothing, even the powers of Hell, or the gate of Hades would prevail against Jesus and His movement of believers.

At Caesarea Philippi was a cave known as "gates of Hades," where people would throw animal sacrifices into the water. Jesus presents a new perspective and reality. Instead of a spring that swallowed life, Living Water that swallows death and creates springs welling up to eternal life, would come from Christ. And this Living Water would be distributed and flowed by His Church.

"But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." John 4:14 NVI

You see, it's not about a man, or an institution. It's All about Jesus. Through His life and ministry, Jesus inaugurated His Church to be a living fountain of life, presenting and displaying Christ. The Church was created by Him, for Him, and He holds all church together. That is what church it is all about - Jesus! Let's Be the Church - Loving and Serving.