

# WHY CAESAREA PHILIPPI?

One of the most important moments in Jesus's life for establishing His identity as the Messiah occurred at Caesarea Philippi in response to His question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13). One would have expected this conversation to have occurred along the shores of the Sea of Galilee or in Jerusalem. Instead, this revelation of Jesus Christ's identity took place at Caesarea Philippi, a place He visited only once. Why did Jesus walk 25 miles north to have this crucial conversation about His messiahship?

## THE PLACE

First-century Caesarea Philippi was a relatively new city, founded by Herod the Great's son Philip in 3 BC. Because its spring gushed forth from a cave to form the headwaters of the Jordan River, it was associated with ancient cults long before it was a city.<sup>1</sup> The Greek historian Polybius was the first to mention the site by name, and he called the site "Panium" because of its sanctuary honoring the Greek god Pan.<sup>2</sup> Pan was depicted as half human and half goat, often playing the flute and sexually pursuing nymphs, maidens, and even animals. Many believed that Pan dwelt in caves among the nearby mountains.

Little more than the Pan sanctuary existed there until Caesar Augustus gave the territory to Herod the Great in 20 BC. In response Herod built a white marble temple, where people worshiped Augustus. When Philip inherited the territory, he built his new capital there and changed the name to Caesarea in honor of Caesar Augustus. The city was soon called Caesarea Philippi to distinguish it from the Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast.

Jesus visited Caesarea Philippi during the reign of Philip (4 BC–AD 34). Later, Agrippa II enlarged the city further and briefly changed the city's name to Neronias in honor of Nero. Following the death of Agrippa II, the Romans ruled Caesarea Philippi directly through the province of Syria. During the second and third centuries, Caesarea Philippi experienced its golden age of prosperity and construction. Its name was changed to Caesarea Paneas and then simply to Paneas. The current name of the site, Baniyas, reflects its ancient origins and connection to Pan.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE

Jesus led His disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13) and the villages around the outskirts of the city (Mark 8:27) where a significant Jewish community

lived.<sup>3</sup> The sacred area of Caesarea Philippi with its numerous religious sites stood alongside the massive cliff and cave. The sacred area gave way to the governmental and business district, which then gave way to wealthier dwellings.<sup>4</sup> The bulk of the population, however, lived in the villages around the city in Greek, Syrian, and Jewish communities.<sup>5</sup>

Here, in response to Jesus's question about His identity, Peter related how others identified Jesus before confessing Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). In contrast to the philosophy and reasoning of the Greeks, Peter's knowledge of Jesus's identity was revealed to him by God in heaven, not by flesh and blood (16:17). The contrast between "the living God" and the dead, false gods at the heart of Caesarea Philippi could not have been starker.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, nearby in the temple Herod had built, Augustus was worshiped as "the son of god."<sup>7</sup>

With the massive cliff of Caesarea Philippi as a backdrop, Jesus said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (16:18). In Greek, the play on words is obvious, with *Petros* (Peter) and *petra* (rock). In Aramaic, which Jesus spoke here, the words are identical, *Kepha* (Peter or Cephas) and *kepha* (rock). This was made all the more dramatic with the rock of Caesarea Philippi in view.

The cliff of Caesarea Philippi was marked by a large cave at its base. This was not just any cave. People believed Pan lived in the cave and that it reached into the underworld—that it was one of the "Gates of Hades." If Jesus's statement about the "Gates of Hades" were to be understood to mean that not even death could defeat the church,<sup>8</sup> then His pronouncement could not have been more dramatic with the "Gates of Hades" nearby.

Peter confessed Jesus's true identity as the Messiah. In so many respects, the surroundings of Caesarea Philippi proclaimed Jesus's superiority over paganism, Caesar, and death. Jesus was not just a Jewish Messiah but the Christ for the whole world.

1. John Kutsko, "Caesarea Philippi," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:803; John Francis Wilson, *Caesarea Philippi: Baniyas, the Lost City of Pan* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 2.  
2. Polybius, *Histories* 16.18-19.  
3. Wilson, *Lost City of Pan*, 20-21, 29.  
4. For descriptions of the excavations at Caesarea Philippi see Zvi Uri Ma'oz, "Baniyas," in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 1:136-43; and John F. Wilson and Vassilios Tzaferis, "Baniyas Dig Reveals King's Palace," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 24 (January-February 1998), 54-61.  
5. Wilson, *Lost City of Pan*, 20-21.  
6. Donald Hagner, "Matthew 14-28," *Word Biblical Commentary* (Word Books: Dallas, 1995), 469.  
7. Calvin J. Roetzel, *The World That Shaped the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 73.  
8. F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 143; Hagner, 472; Frank Stagg, "Matthew," *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 174.

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