

Caesarea Philippi (Καيسάρεια ἡ Φιλίππου, *Kaisareia hē Philippou*). An ancient city located in the Levant and mentioned in two of the Gospels (Matt 16:13; Mark 8:27).

Biblical Relevance

Caesarea Philippi is mentioned once in Matthew and once in Mark. In both instances, the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi provides the setting for a conversation in which Jesus asks His disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”—to which Simon Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:13–20; Mark 8:27–30). Luke records a similar conversation but does not mention Caesarea Philippi (Luke 9:18–22).

Geography

Caesarea Philippi was located roughly 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee and 40 miles southwest of Damascus. It overlooked the Jordan Valley and was near the base of Mount Hermon, which stood approximately 9,200 feet to the northeast and provided an abundant supply of water to the region. The land appears to have been ideal for vegetation, and the elevation of the city (1,150 feet) made it a strategic military location.

History

Prior to the Hellenistic period (roughly 321 bc), no name is known for the area that would become Caesarea Philippi. The Old Testament towns Baal-gad (Josh 11:17; 12:7; 13:5) and Baal-hermon (Judg 3:3; 1 Chr 5:23) were located in this region.

During Alexander the Great’s conquest of the area in the fourth century bc, a shrine located in a cave (a source for the Jordan River) was dedicated to the pagan god Pan (Wilson, *Caesarea Philippi*, 2). Pan was the Greek god of forests and deserted places, as well as flocks and shepherds (Wilson, *Caesarea Philippi*, 3). At the time of Antiochus the Great, the site was called Panium (Polybius, *Histories* 16.18). Around 20 bc, Augustus gave the district of Panias to Herod the Great. Herod built a temple of white marble and dedicated it to Augustus (called Paneas and Panium by Josephus; *Antiquities* 15.10.3 360–61, 363–64; *Jewish War* 1.21.3 404–405). After Herod died, the area was given to his son Philip (*Antiquities* 17.8.1 189).

Around 2 bc, Philip expanded this sparsely populated area of pagan worship into a city and named it Caesarea Philippi, in honor of Caesar Tiberius and himself. The name distinguished Philip’s city from the coastal city of Caesarea (*Antiquities* 18.2.1 28; *Jewish War* 2.9.1 168). Caesarea Philippi later became the capital city of the region and Philip’s place of residence.

When Agrippa II took over the region, he built up the city and changed its name to Neronias, in honor of Nero (*Antiquities* 20.9.4 214; *Jewish War* 3.10.7 514). The name never gained popularity, so it was changed back to Caesarea Philippi after Nero’s death (ad 68). Josephus indicates that the town was predominantly non-Jewish (*Vita* 13.74). Roman armies under the command of Vespasian and Titus stopped at Caesarea Philippi during the Jewish War, and Titus threw some of his Jewish captives to wild beasts there (*Jewish War* 3.9.7 443–444; 7.2.1 23–24).

In later Roman and Byzantine times the original name Panias (or Paneas) replaced Caesarea Philippi (Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 140, 180–181) until it eventually was changed to Banias (the Arabic form of Paneas)—its name today.

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