

The Gates of Hades - Text and Context

Matthew 16:13-20

September 2019

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Peter Confesses Jesus as the Christ

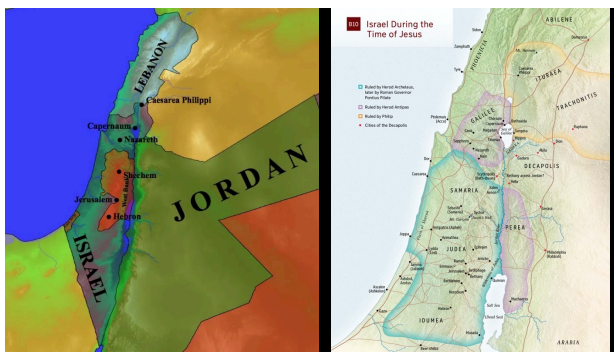
¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and **the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.** ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Introduction

I have just come back from a wonderful tour of biblical sites in Jordan and Israel. I have washed my feet in the Jordan River, swum in the Lake of Galilee and floated on the Dead Sea. I have stood on Mounts Nebo, Megiddo, Masada as well as Zion and the Temple Mount.

It was 14 days of wonder during which so much of what I have read over the years came alive. I have come back excited about reading the Bible with a better sense of the world of Jesus and the Old Testament. *A blog of our travels is available on the Church Website. Just go there and the banner makes it clear where to go.*

Several places really gripped me as they filled out the words I knew from the Scriptures. This morning I want walk us through a place and then consider the text of what Jesus said in that place.



One day we drove north from Galilee - up over the Golan heights - to the border with Lebanon. We were going to a place known as ‘Banias’.

‘Banias’ is an Arab name that preserves an earlier Greco-Roman name, ‘Panias’. As Arab speakers don’t use the P sound they turn it to a ‘B’ thus Panias became Banias and remains that way today.

On the maps that place is named as Caesarea Philippi which is how we heard it referred to in the gospel reading from Matthew 16.

Let’s look at what these place names are all about.

Banias and Panias refer to the Pagan god Pan who I talk about a little later. The cult of worshipping Pan came with the inflow of Greek culture following Alexander the Great and his conquest of the area. The Pagan Greeks brought with them mythologies that were sometimes associated with new places.

What the Greeks found here was an impressive spring of water that gushed up in a cave that was part of a limestone ridge or cliff face fronted with a natural terrace. This spring sourced a river that flowed into the Jordan. They perceived this dramatic place as a portal between the world we live in and the underworld where the dead were believed to go and where the gods lived. In Greek this is named ‘Hades’.

Other portals to Hades - or the place where the gods lived and the dead went - were revered in dramatic caves and volcano vents around the Pagan world.

In science fiction today this imagination is represented by worm-holes or time-portals where people can touch another reality or even enter into it.

These were the 'Gates of Hades' which we tend to hear unhelpfully translated as the 'Gates of Hell'. These portals to the underworld were considered a good place to worship.

This is the scene as we saw it:

At the bottom of Mount Hermon is a distinctive limestone ridge with a long ledge or natural terrace.



Ridge
&
Cave
today



The Cave today

A special feature of this ridge with the natural terrace is a single deep cave or grotto.

In the time of the Greeks and in Jesus' day a spring gushed up out of here. In later centuries an earthquake blocked this spring off. From then on the water seeps out quietly from another crack in the rocks becoming a river feeding the Jordan.

So back to the Pagan Greeks and what they considered as a portal to hades where the gods lived and the dead travelled to.

People would come in front of this cave with its gushing spring to worship and offer sacrifices. Pagan worship could involve anything as an attempt to commune with the gods. The phrase 'sex, drugs and rock-n-roll' captures the ways people became ecstatic in pagan worship.

To make a sacrificial offering they would bring offerings - which may have human sacrifice - to the cave front and throw them into the turbulent waters. Then they waited. If the offering sunk to the back regions of the cave it was believed to have been accepted and the worshippers could be happy. If however, it floated back to the surface it was deemed to have been rejected. I was told it would then be killed or destroyed anyway as guilty or impure. If however the sacrifice disappeared but blood was seen to ooze out in other nearby springs it had also been rejected.

So from about 300 years before Jesus this cave and spring had become a cult site for Pagans at a gateway to hades and the realm of the gods.

The next feature to note was that this gateway to hades was associated with one particular Greek god named 'Pan'.

I don't want to say much about Pan but he was weird! Pan had goat features and was associated with wild places so considered a friend of shepherds and he chased the nymphs. He invented the pan-flute to help him cope with a sad love life and was able to instill terror which the Greeks named after him as 'panic'.



Pan:

- Half goat half human.
- god of wild places
- Instiller of panic
- Very sexualised

This cult worship ran at these Gates of Hades dedicated to Pan in Greek form until the Romans arrived in 63 BC. Roman power blended easily with Greek Paganism so the Romans merged the identities of their gods. They also attached the cult of emperor devotion alongside or above other worship.

Within this, client kings subject to Rome were able to show their loyalty to their benefactors by building temples to honour the Caesars. King Herod the Great did this as often as he could.

So in 19 BC King Herod has a temple built in honour of the divine Augustus directly in front of the Gates of Hades. It was a classical temple that opened up to the cave behind in effect providing a Roman front door to the Greek gates of Hades. This is how power and religion got merged in many places with Jerusalem an obvious exception.

To really get the message across to Rome, Herod also renamed this place of Pan after his political sponsor Octavian Caesar in Rome. It now became 'Caesarea Philippi'.

This picture reconstructs what this part of the site was like at around 300 AD - well after Jesus.

In front of the grotto on the left is the temple to the divine Augustus from 19 BC.

To the right came the Court of Pan and the Nymphs - then after Jesus - came the Temple of Zeus, The Court of the Nemesis (178 CE), The Tomb of the Sacred Goats and then the Temple of Pan and the Dancing Goats.



Some Remaining Features

The Court of Pan was kept out in the open but there were niches carved into the rock-face for statues.

Those niches are still there today.

So Let's Summarize:

Jesus is a long way from home walking with his disciples. He has taken them half way to Damascus, not far from Tyre and Sidon and in well into Pagan territory at the northern most extent of historic Israel.

He is in the region - or close to - this much celebrated geological feature that serves pagans as a portal to the underworld where capricious gods and powers of death live with the dead. It is a place where rocky geology, Paganism and Roman Power all meet and flow together.

He is a Galilean Rabbi on the road with his friends.

In this region - with this background - Jesus starts the critical conversation of the gospels:

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

Jesus comes in low inviting a survey of public opinion. That's not too hard so his disciples let him know:

¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

That's all very interesting but not what he is really wanting to know. So:

¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

This is the moment of great tension. The disciples had picked up the way people recognized Jesus as special and that needed explanation. So people were explaining the present in terms of the past. Somehow, in God's provision, great prophets of Israel were seen as present and active in Jesus.

Jesus wants to hear a personal assessment from them, here and now.

¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Woooooooooh!!

This is the biggest description he could offer. God was doing something long awaited and new in this age as never before. From heaven above had come God's anointed son and Jesus was him.

Jesus is excited and rejoices over the break-through:

¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

Imagine sitting in a poorly lit room or outside and a flash of lightening illuminates everything for a split second. In that second we may see things we did not know about. Things we could never have discovered for ourselves in the dark. It takes a second but the vision remains.

That's away of explaining what enabled Peter to see Jesus and say what he saw. Later he would struggle to remember this.

For now Jesus rejoices and does so in terms of where they are: Caesarea Philippi around 30 AD.

¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of *hades* shall not prevail against it.

Two things to pick up on here:

- 1) From the wider narrative we know Peter is not a solid person in himself. He is no rock but the confession he had just made was solid rock. Many years ago I was privileged to accompany a family friend in his last days as he died of cancer. Bill had worked with bricks, blocks, plaster and cement since he was 16. He knew stones. The last time I saw him we walked a round of the hospital corridors with a nurse and his medication frame. Kind-hearted man he was, he gently said to the nurse: "You are a brick." That was a touching compliment saying, "I can depend on you, I can build with you."

That's what I hear Jesus saying to Simon. If you have come to believe through revelation that I am the Christ, the Son of the living God, I can build my church on you - and this is the only place Jesus is quoted as using that word: '*ekklesia*' for church.

Just a quick comment here: Jesus builds his church. I believe that is still true today so I try to not get in his way.

- 2) Then Jesus makes the statement I have been orientating to:
 “and the gates of *hades* shall not prevail against it.”

All that you see operating here will not snuff out the church I build on your profession of faith in me as God’s Son, the Messiah.

The Gates of Hades were physically modeled and operating near by. The power of Rome had been involved. Jesus was saying that nothing that comes from there will be able to overcome his church – ever.

Friends we get to see enough history in a life time to recognize that the Gates of Hades and all that represents makes a big effort to prevail against the church. There were more martyrs recorded in the 20th century than every previous century combined. This century is more of the same.

In Israel it is obvious that God stands with his people and they will prevail. Jesus is saying that the church he builds will also prevail.

I believe that is the church built on the confession from revelation of Jesus as the Son of God - the awaited Messiah.

Jesus then says something I can’t go into but to say:

The Pagan world looked down to the world below. Their gods were debauched versions of ourselves. Consequently as we become like what we worship, they were caught up in the evil amorality of their unholy mythologies and idols.

The church of Jesus based on faith in him looks upwards to heaven and the holiness of God.

¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Peter and the others will be given access in the Kingdom of Heaven, not as a place of future reward but to live life now in God’s Kingdom.

But for now - Shhhhhh. Don’t tell any one!

Application

Do you have some gate of hades in your life - some portal that bubbles up poison and knocks the life out of you? It may be a person, a colleague, a family member etc?

Jesus knows about that.

What he invites us to is recognize who he is and place our faith in him.

He invites us to be a part of his church that corporately will never be overcome by any gate of hades.

Jesus would himself now exercise this faith to walk 200km south from here to Jerusalem where he would allow the Gates of Hades to throw everything at him. You know what happened: Cross and Resurrection.

That is the Gospel of our Lord who calls us to live in Him, to prevail as His church no matter what is thrown at us, even death itself.