

Caesarea Philippi



“When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, ‘Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’ So they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered and said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’” (Matthew 16:13-16)

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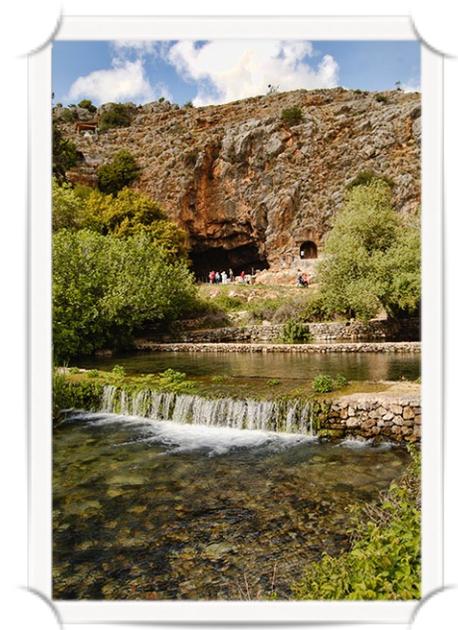
Introduction

- I. Jesus chose the region of Caesarea Philippi to ask His disciples, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (Matt 16:13–20; cf. Mark 8:27–30).
 - A. Caesarea Philippi was a city on the southwestern slope of Mount Hermon and the northernmost extent of Jesus’ ministry.
 - B. Here, about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus could be alone with His disciples.
 - C. The snowcapped peak of Mount Hermon (9,232 feet above sea level) can be seen on a clear day from as far away as Nazareth, where Jesus grew up.
 - D. Caesarea Philippi was outside the domain of Herod Antipas (ruler of Galilee) and within the area of Philip the Tetrarch.
 - E. The population of the surrounding area was non-Jewish, so Jesus could teach the twelve in peace.
 - F. There is no record of any civilian habitation at the time, so Caesarea Philippi was an *administrative center* and not yet a *city* during Jesus’ lifetime.
 - G. “In the year A.D. 53 or 54 Agrippa II became king of the principality and transformed Caesarea Philippi into a Greco-Roman city. The magnificent administrative palace was converted into a public bath house, and a long colonnaded street was constructed through the middle of the city. Fresh water was supplied through underground pipes and a new aqueduct.” (John H. Walton, ed., *Archaeological Study Bible*)
- II. It is interesting to see *where* Jesus chose to ask this question.
 - A. There are few districts with more religious associations than here.
 - B. This history of Caesarea Philippi makes an interesting backdrop for the question Jesus posed to His disciples.

Discussion

I. The Background Of Caesarea Philippi

- A. Caesarea Philippi is one of the most pleasant sites in Israel with groves of trees and grassy fields abounding.
 1. It is on a terrace 1,150 feet high overlooking a fertile valley.
 2. Water is in abundance, for the city is near the spot where the spring *Nabr Baniyas*, one of the sources of the Jordan, gushes from a cave in the bluffs.
- B. The area was scattered with the remains of ancient Syrian Baal worship—at least fourteen temples have been identified.



1. “So Joshua took all this land: the mountain country, all the South, all the land of Goshen, the lowland, and the Jordan plain—the mountains of Israel and its lowlands, from Mount Halak and the ascent to Seir, even as far as *Baal Gad in the Valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon*. He captured all their kings, and struck them down and killed them” (Josh 11:17).
2. “...five lords of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites who dwelt in Mount Lebanon, from *Mount Baal Hermon* to the entrance of Hamath” (Judg 3:3).
3. “So the children of the half-tribe of Manasseh dwelt in the land. Their numbers increased from Bashan to *Baal Hermon*, that is, to Senir, or Mount Hermon” (1 Chr 5:23).
4. Caesarea Philippi was a place in the shadow of ancient pagan gods.



- C. A cave at Caesarea Philippi is said to be the birthplace of the Greek god *Pan*, the god of nature, fields, forests, mountains, flocks and shepherds.
1. “He is son of Hermes by one or another *nymph*; his mother was so scared by his appearance that she abandoned him at birth and Hermes introduced him to Olympus. His name is probably related to the same root as Latin *pasco*, and thus means ‘shepherd.’” (Richard Stoneman, *Greek Mythology*, 136)
 - a) The original name for Caesarea Philippi was *Panias* (alternate spellings: Paneas, Paneion and Paneias).

- b) “But coins show that least from the later second century onward it was generally known as Caesarea Panias, or Caesarea Beneath Panion” (Michael Grant, *A Guide To The Ancient World*, 136).
- c) The modern name is *Banias*, an Arabic corruption of *Panias*.
- 2. In the Hellenistic period a sanctuary was built to Pan.
 - a) The cult of Pan originated in Arcadia, a pastoral region in Greece.
 - b) Greek travelers, finding the landscape was like their homeland, established this area of worship to Pan.
- 3. There are five niches hewn out of rock to the right of the cave—at one time they probably held statues.
 - a) Three of the niches bear inscriptions in Greek mentioning Pan, Echo and Galerius (one of Pan’s priests).
 - b) One inscription reads, “to Pan and the Nymphs,” and is still discernible beneath the niche closest to the huge cave.
- 4. Because the cave is associated with pagan writers, some scholars point to this as the origin of the term “the gates of Hades” (Matt 16:18).
- D. The cave at Caesarea Philippi is also the most eastern source of the Jordan River—this alone would make the area full of emotion for the Jews.
 - 1. Earthquakes over the years have changed the formation of the cave, forcing the water to emerge at the foot of the cave rather than from within it.
 - 2. Another source of the Jordan River is the nearby Banias Waterfall in the Hermon River (Banias) Nature Reserve.
 - a) The physical background to Psalm 42:1-8 can only be this waterfall.
 - b) Once you associate these words with this place, you will never again read them again without the thunder of the water resounding in your ears.
- E. In Caesarea Philippi there was a great temple of white marble built to the godhead of Caesar—it had been built by Herod the Great.
 - 1. “At Paneas Antiochius III defeated the Ptolemies of Egypt in 200 B.C.E., thus establishing Seleucid rule in Palestine and Syria... In 20 B.C.E., Augustus gave Paneas to King Herod who erected there a temple of white marble to his patron (Josephus, *Antiq.* 15, 10.3/360); but the city was built only later by his son Herod Philip. During the First Jewish War (66-70 C.E.), Vespasian together with Titus and his army encamped there, and were entertained by King Agrippa II (Josephus, *War*, 3, 9.7/443-44). After the death of Agrippa II, Caesarea Philippi was attributed to the province of Syria, and later to Phoenicia.” (Rousseau and Arav, *Jesus And His World*, 4)



2. In 2 B.C. Herod the Great's son Philip named it *Caesarea* in honor of Augustus, and, to differentiate it from *Caesarea Maritima*, it became known as *Caesarea Philippi*.
 3. Later, Herod Agrippa would call the place *Neroneas* in honor of the Roman Emperor Nero.
 4. After the destruction of Jerusalem, "The victors gave no quarter, but slew all Jews upon whom they could lay their hands; 97,000 fugitives were caught and sold as slaves; many of them died as unwilling gladiators in the triumphal games that were celebrated at Berytus, Caesarea Philippi and Rome." (Will Durant, *Caesar And Christ*, 545)
 5. "Titus held a victory review, and then retired for a holiday to Agrippa II's capital, Caesarea Philippi. There, in the presence of that Jewish king, 2500 of his captured co-religionists were slaughtered in gladiatorial games, in honor of the birthday of Titus's younger brother Domitian." (Michael Grant, *The Jews in the Roman World*, 203)
- F. The town was probably destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 363.
1. Since 1967 there has been considerable excavation here.
 2. The shrine of Pan has been cleared, along with the Herodian palace.



II. Who Is Jesus?

- A. With Caesarea Philippi as a backdrop we have a dramatic picture.
 1. Here is a homeless, penniless Galilean carpenter, with twelve ordinary men around Him.
 2. The Jewish leaders were already plotting and planning on destroying Him as a dangerous heretic.
- B. Look where Jesus was standing...
 1. In an area littered with the temples of the Syrian gods.
 2. Beneath the idols of a so-called deity, Pan, carved into the cliffs.
 3. In a place where the most important river in Judaism sprang to life.
 4. In a place where the white marble splendor of the home of Caesar-worship dominated the landscape and compelled the eye.
- C. It is as if Jesus deliberately set Himself against the background of the world's religions in all their splendor and glory and demanded to be compared with them.

III. The Transfiguration

- A. The great moment at Caesarea Philippi was followed by the great hour on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-9).

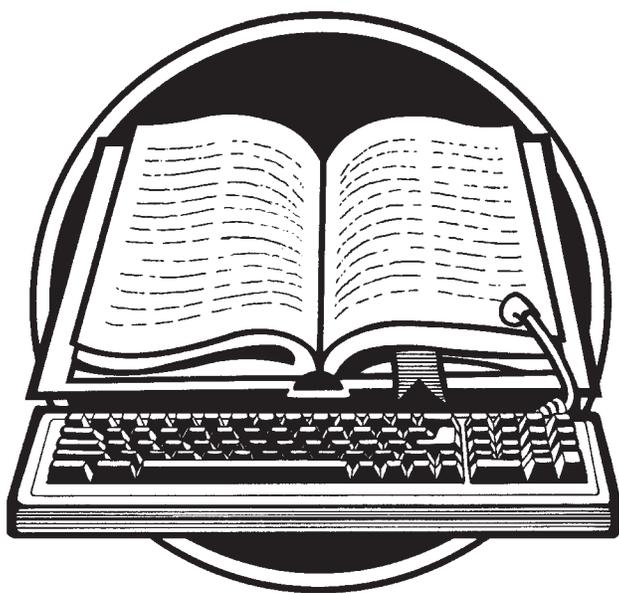


- B. There is a tradition which connects the Transfiguration with Mount Tabor, but that is highly unlikely.
1. Mount Tabor is too far away to fit into the story.
 2. The main problem, however, is that at the time Mount Tabor was populated and a Hasmonean fortress stood on its summit.
 3. The fortified mountain had to be conquered by the Romans in the great Jewish War in A.D. 67.
 4. The great church historian Eusebius (A.D. 265-340) also claims that Caesarea Philippi was the site of the Transfiguration.
- C. It is more likely that the Transfiguration happened on Mount Hermon, just fourteen miles from Caesarea Philippi.
1. Mount Hermon is Israel's highest mountain.
 2. Its summit (9,232 feet above sea level) is actually in Syrian territory.
 3. Mount Hermon is 11,000 above the level of the Jordan valley—so high it can be seen from the Dead Sea, at the other end of Palestine, more than 100 miles away.
 4. Mount Hermon was generally considered as a “holy mountain” (2 Pet 1:18).
 5. Jesus had come to this mountain to pray (Luke 9:28-29).

- D. The Transfiguration must have happened at night, for Luke tells us that the disciples were weighted down with sleep (Luke 9:28–35).
1. It was the next day when Jesus and His disciples came back down to the plain to find the father of the epileptic boy waiting (Luke 9:37).
 2. It was probably some time in the sunset, or in the late evening, when the Transfiguration took place.
- E. Here on the mountain two great figures appear—Moses and Elijah—both of whom had experienced the power of God on a mountain top.
1. When Moses came down from Sinai, he did “did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him” (Exod 34:29).
 - a) It was on Mount Sinai that Moses received the Law (Exod 31:18).
 - b) Moses could see Mount Hermon from Mount Nebo (Deut 34:1–4).
 2. Elijah met with God on Mount Horeb (1 Kgs 19:8–12).
 - a) Moses was the great law *giver*, and Elijah was the great *defender* of the law.
 - b) Elijah met the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:20–40).
- F. The topic of conversation at the Transfiguration was “of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:30–31).
1. Both Moses and Elijah departed this world in an unusual manner.
 2. Moses was buried in a place known only to God (Deut 34:5–12).
 3. Elijah was talking with Elisha, and “as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kgs 2:11).
- G. The gospel writers speak of the luminous *cloud* that overshadowed them.
1. Matthew tells us it was a *bright* cloud, emphasizing that this is no ordinary cloud (Matt 17:5)
 2. The cloud was a part of Israel’s history—throughout their history it had stood for the *Shekinah*—the visible glory of Almighty God!
 3. In Exodus we read of the *pillar of cloud* which was to lead people on their way (Exod 13:21–22).
 4. It was in a cloud that the Lord descended to give Moses the tables of the Law (Exod 34:5).
 5. When the Tabernacle was completed the narrative ends with these words: “Then the *cloud* covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exod 40:34).
 6. At the dedication of Solomon’s Temple, “when the priests came out of the holy place, that the *cloud* filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the *cloud*; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” (1 Kgs 8:10–11).
 7. No Jew could have seen the *shechinah* without thinking of the glory of God resting upon His people.

Conclusion

- I. From the glory on the mount of Transfiguration to the humiliation on the cross, Jesus was still “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16).
- II. Who do you say that Jesus, the Son of Man, is?



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