

The WildBranch Ministry

...thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Romans 11:18

On This Rock I Will Rebuild My Church

Part 5

As it is with the Torah readings, there are many levels of teaching in this conversation between Y'shua and Kefa. We had last discussed the connection between the 'rebuilding' of the divided congregation of Israel and Kefa's confession that Y'shua was the SON of the living God. When looking at this statement from a purely western point of view, it appears that Y'shua is called the 'son' only as a reference to His relationship with the Father, i.e. as in the earthly relationship between father and son. But this term goes much deeper and much more prophetic than that. It also refers to an architect (Father, *av*) and a builder (son, *ben*) This in turn refers us to the prophesied Messiah as being He who also created all things (Colossians 1:15-19, Yochanan 1:1-3). It is then no coincidence that when God takes upon flesh and dwells among us that He comes as a carpenter, for Y'shua again makes reference to this truth in Ivrim 3:6:

"But Messiah as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end."

With this in mind it is not too difficult to see why Sha'ul refers to the Messiah as the Author and Finisher of our faith (Ivrim 12:2). The truth that is imperative to face, in my opinion, is that the scriptures read in their wholeness, leads to no other conclusion than the simple fact that Messiah is indeed YHVH in the flesh, the Aleph and the Tav, the Great Shepherd and the Lamb of God, the root, the seed and the branches, the sower and that which is sown, the builder and the building. I believe that Kefa, having seen and heard virtually everything that Y'shua said and did, could come to no other conclusion than he did. Who is like Him, the lion and the lamb, seated on the throne.

There are two more points I would like to highlight before bringing this teaching to a close. Kefa recognized WHO the Messiah was, by the fruit that Messiah produced. Hebrew is an action oriented language that should produce an action oriented theology in God's people as well. Western thinking has always generally focused on nouns, i.e. people, places and things. We, almost instinctively, want to know all the who's and what's before we are prepared to act. This is why many of us never actually move into the acting part of faith. We seem to always find ourselves unable to leave the who and what part. We never seem to be able to fully arrive at WHO the Messiah is, or WHO we are, and subsequently we are unable to arrive at HOW and WHAT we are supposed to do. If we focus on the verbs or action, as Messiah did, it will become self evident WHO we are.

In our theological quests to understand WHO or WHAT the rock is that Messiah will rebuild His assembly upon, I would like to highlight a layer of teaching that is perhaps revealed in the location of Kefa's confession. In Mark's gospel we are told that the place where Messiah made his remarks was in Caesarea Philippi. This city was originally called Panias, or the place of the Pan god. This place was one of the most well known worship sites for pagan deities on the planet. After the Arab conquest it was renamed Banias. Before making my concluding comments concerning this location as it relates to Y'shua's comments, I would like you to take the time to read some of the history of this famous location. I cannot remember which encyclopedia I took this from, so I first extend my apologies to those I need to give credit to.

"Banias's first inhabitants were probably the Greek Seleucids who conquered the region in 198 B.C. With its constant flowing waters, caves and cliffs below the majestic Hermon Mountain, Banias was so impressive that the Seleucids apparently endowed the Banias with supernatural powers. It is likely that the scenery around Banias reminded them of home, for they imported stories about Pan, the pagan god of nature - to the cliff and Banias spring. In fact, scholars believe the ancients held that the half-goat, half-man god resided within the cave!

Five niches hewn in the rock are remnants of a temple built to Pan. An inscription at the base of one of the niches refers to Pan as a "lover of the tunes" as he was famous for his reed flute. Banias was originally called Panias in his honor. Its current name is a local corruption of the letter P.

After Panias came under Roman rule, King Herod built a magnificent white temple at the site. Following Herod's death his son Herod Phillip established Panias as his capital city and called it Caesarea Philippi to distinguish it from Caesarea on the coast. Hundreds of years later Crusaders added a great fortified wall to Caesarea Philippi, which was the site of numerous battles between Christians and Moslems during the Crusader era.

It was near Caesarea Philippi, the center of pagan worship, that Jesus traveled with His disciples to examine their understanding of who He was. Here Peter proclaimed his identity. Jesus responded, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" [Matthew 16:18].

The remains of the city of Banyas (Arabic pronunciation of Panias) are located in northern Israel, at the foot of Mt. Hermon. Here, below a steep cliff, the cold waters of the Banyas spring, one of the sources of the Jordan River, gush forth.

According to written sources, Banyas was first settled in the Hellenistic period. The Ptolemaic kings, in the 3rd century BCE, built a cult center to counter the Semitic one at Dan to the south, which indeed gradually declined. Then, in 200 BCE, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III defeated the Ptolemaic army in this region and captured Banyas.

Almost 200 years later, in 20 BCE, the region which included Banyas was annexed to the Kingdom of Herod the Great and was ruled by his successors until the end of the first century CE. In the year 2 BCE, Herod Philip founded a pagan city and named it Caesarea Philippi (in honor of Augustus Caesar). It became the capital of his large kingdom which spread across the Golan and the Hauran. Contemporary sources refer to the city as Caesarea Panias; the New Testament as Caesarea Philippi. (Matt. 16:13)

During the Roman period, the center of the city spread over a plateau measuring 300 x 300 m., with natural features protecting it on three sides. At its peak, it extended even beyond these natural boundaries.

From the fourth century and until the Arab conquest, Panias functioned as an important Christian center. During the Arab period, the city was the district capital of the Golan in the province of Damascus and its name was changed to Banyas. During Fatimid rule in the 11th century, fortifications were constructed. Then the Crusaders, who ruled the town from 1129, surrounded it with a massive ring of fortifications. However, after repeated attacks, the city was conquered by Nur ed-Din of Damascus in 1164. Fearing that it might again serve as a Crusader fortress, the fortifications were dismantled at the beginning of the 13th century and are, therefore, only partly visible. Banyas gradually lost its importance. Today there is a Druze holy place (Weli Sheikh Khader) in a whitewashed building on the cliff overlooking the spring.

Since 1967, but mainly during the last ten years, major excavations at the site have focused upon two areas: the remains of the sanctuary complex to the god Pan; and the center of the city the latter continue to the present.

The temenos (sacred precinct) dedicated to Pan was constructed on an elevated, 80 m. long natural terrace along a cliff which towered over the north of the city. At its western end is a large grotto which has been regarded as sacred to Pan since the Hellenistic period. At the foot of the sacred precinct is the spring, a major component in the sites sanctity. The cult site to the god Pan derives from the juxtaposition of natural features which include forest, spring and cave. From time immemorial, the site had been visited by wandering shepherds who worshipped at the cave and the spring.

The excavations uncovered remains of a cult center dedicated to the god Pan which developed in several phases during the Roman period. The temenos included a temple, courtyards, a grotto and niches for rituals. Several decorated niches were cut into the rock cliff, in which statues probably stood in the past. Inscriptions, mentioning donors, were carved between the niches. Of the temples which stood here, only the foundations survived. Following the Muslim

conquest in the 7th century, this pagan cult center which had existed throughout the Byzantine period was destroyed and the ashlar of the walls removed for re-use.

Opposite the entrance to the sacred grotto, Herod the Great, in 19 BCE, built a temple in honor of his patron, Augustus Caesar, described by the contemporary Jewish historian Josephus Flavius (The Jewish War I: 404-405). This temple was 20 m. long and had two parallel walls, 10.5 m. apart. Cult niches which once contained sculptures were found along the inner faces of the walls, which also served as retaining walls. This semi-subterranean building also provided access to the sacred grotto behind the temple. This temple, only partly preserved, is depicted on contemporary coins minted by the city, showing a facade decorated with four Ionic columns.

During the first century CE another shrine, dedicated to Pan and the Nymphs, was constructed east of the Temple of Augustus. This building consisted of three especially thick walls with cement foundations; it abutted the cliff on its north, creating a rectangular enclosure measuring 15 x 10 m. which apparently served as an open-air shrine. A small grotto was cut into the rock cliff behind it and, in a later period, niches for statues were added. A Greek inscription indicates that these niches date to the year 148: "The priest Victor, son of Lysimachos, dedicated this goddess to the god Pan, lover of Echo."

Around the year 100 (the 100th anniversary of Pania), during the reign of Trajanus Caesar, a Temple of Zeus was built at Banyas, east of the previous one. The temple consisted of two rooms: a hall measuring 8.25 x 7.6 m. which was originally covered with colored marble slabs and a 4.25 m.- wide front porch. The facade of the building was decorated with four columns with Corinthian capitals of especially fine workmanship. It has been suggested that rituals were also carried out on the roof of the building, opposite the niches cut into the cliff face. A 4 m.-wide paved courtyard, approached from the south by a broad staircase, was dedicated to Nemesis, goddess of revenge and justice, whose cult was popular in the region. A carved niche in the rock cliff above it bears the inscription: "For the preservation of our lords the emperors, Valerios

[Titi]janos, priest of god Pan, dedicated to the lady Nemesis and her Shrine which was made by cutting away the rock underneath... with the iron fence in the month of Apellaios."

In the third century, a cultic building for the burial of the bones of the sacred goats was erected at the eastern end of the sacred precinct. The structure was divided into three long halls oriented north-south. Along the walls of the central hall (which measures 12.5 x 6.6 m.) were two low galleries supported by rectangular niches (0.6 sq. m. each) opening onto the central hall. The niches contained sherds and a large quantity of animal bones, mainly of sheep and goats, bringing to mind the cult of the sacred goats related to the god Pan, as depicted on Roman coins of the city of Panias. These finds suggest that the structure was used as a temple-tomb for the interment of the bones of the sacred goats, whose cult was probably practiced in the buildings excavated at Banyas.

The temple was found covered by a mound of debris with an abundance of fragments of statues and statuettes, among them Athena, Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, Dionysos and Pan. The best-preserved statue (restored from two fragments) is that of a half life-size Artemis with a hunting dog attacking a hare at her feet. The statues and statuettes were probably offerings brought to the sacred precinct and destroyed as an act of anti-paganism at the end of the Byzantine period or in the early Arab period.

The Banyas National Park, which includes the excavated and restored archeological remains, is a unique tourist attraction, with a combination of wild natural beauty: cliffs, mountains, forest and an abundance of flowing water. The excavations were directed by Zvi Maoz on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority."

I find it most interesting that Y'shua chose this particular location to make this famous claim. In my effort not to take away from the 'rock' solid importance of who our Messiah is and the relevance of Kefa's confession, I would like to submit to you that the gigantic pagan-infested rock gushing forth water at this site was being pointed to by Messiah. The prophecy of Hosea concerning the prophetic destiny of the only two groups of people in the New Covenant

(Yirmeyahu 31:31, Ivrim 8:8) proclaimed that in the same place where His people were scatter and called 'not my people' is the same place where we are told they would once again 'be my people'. Where was that place? Scattered and mixed throughout the pagan cultures and religions of the world! Paul also alludes to this in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 5:6-10

"For when we were yet without strength, in due time Messiah died for the ungodly. 7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. 8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Messiah died for us. 9 Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. 10 For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

The God of Israel will begin regathering (rebuilding) His sheep in the midst of the very world that His people are not scattered amongst. I also find it no coincidence that the Arabs renamed this place Baniyas. Having no 'p' symbol in the Arabic language, they chose to replace 'pan' with a 'b' instead. Arabic is a southwestern semitic sister language to Hebrew. In Arabic the word for 'son' is *ibn*. Taking the vowel away, we have left over *bn*, the foundational letters for the Hebrew word for 'son'. This place went from the 'place of the pan god, to the 'place of the son'. Perhaps just a linguistic coincidence. Perhaps not.

I hope and pray that this little peek into the Mattityahu 16, shed some light and made some prophetic connections. A great hope that you and I have in the midst of all this, is that in our effort to be faithful to our God in the middle of a culture that worships so many other ways, God has provided in the midst of this 'rock' a fountain, gushing with living waters.

Shalom Alecheim!

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