

# Is Peter the Rock on which the Church is Built?

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 13 May 2018

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] Hello. This time I thought we'd go through the reading of a passage in dialogue with another reading that a friend of mine has presented. I thought it would be perhaps helpful in illuminating discussion of how we come, arrive at particular readings.

What are the instincts that we bring to the text and how can slightly different instincts lead to different readings? And how can we weigh and assess these readings in dialogue? Because this is the way we usually arrive at readings.

We have an array of different texts and interpretations that people have brought forward, different commentaries, different writings that all present a different way of approaching this text.

They'll put certain things to the foreground, say that these are the important background, and others will say no, it's the background that you find within the sociology, for instance.

If you take into account the sociological background, or maybe the rhetorical background, or maybe if you take into account some of the geographical details or some aspect of the Old Testament background, that will be the determinative feature for interpreting the text.

[ 1 : 14 ] And so weighing these different aspects of background and thinking about what is really relevant, what is slightly less relevant, and what is denoted by the text, and how the background can help us understand that, and what may just be connoted by it.

These are the sorts of questions that we have to grapple with as interpreters. And so I thought it would be helpful to go through an example of thinking this through in relationship to a particular text. And the text this time I'm going to look at is Matthew 16, verses 13 to 23. I'll begin by reading that out, and then I'll read a large section of a piece that Joe Minnick wrote on that subject for the Calvinist International.

I'll place the link for that piece also in the notes below. So I highly recommend that you read that piece before going further and hearing this discussion, because it will be helpful for you to understand where Joe is coming from, and then how this debate is set up.

Matthew 16, verses 13 to 23. 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?

[ 2 : 28 ] 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? And Simon Peter answered and said, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Jesus answered and said to him, Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Then he commanded his disciples that they should tell no one that he was Jesus the Christ.

From that time Jesus began to show to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised again the third day.

Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, Far be it from you, Lord, this shall not happen to you. But he turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block or an offence to me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.

[ 3 : 39 ] So this is an important passage within the Gospels. It's a passage that in its reference to Peter as the rock, and the statement concerning the rock being, or the reference to Peter being given the name, and also the reference to the rock upon which the church will be built, that's not found in the other Gospels.

But Peter's confession is. It's found within Luke 9. It's also found within Mark 8. And so it's a significant account. It's also within Luke's Gospel. It's very much a turning point.

It's paralleled, in some senses, with the witness of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the one who, like Elijah, goes before Jesus in his ministry and enters the first stage, beginning with his baptism, and then leading up to the death of John the Baptist.

And the next phase begins with the witness of Peter, and then has the transfiguration, and then leads up to Christ's death and resurrection.

And so there are two phases within the Gospel of Luke. Within Matthew, that's less pronounced. The record of John the Baptist's death occurs quite a bit earlier within the text, and so it's less associated with this particular event as a turning point.

[ 4 : 58 ] But yet it is still a turning point. It's from this point that Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem, and begins that next phase of his ministry as he moves towards Jerusalem, not just as teaching within the region of Galilee and that sort of area.

He's now set his face towards that concluding stage of his ministry. So, the background that we can refer to here, we can talk about Old Testament background, we can talk about the background that we have within various forms of other literature, some pagan literature perhaps.

But the background that Joe draws attention to is geographical, and the significance of this particular location. So, I'll read what he writes.

He has quite a long section on this, so I'll read several parts. Focusing on the Pericope itself, it is quite significant, but often overlooked, that our passage immediately involves Jesus coming into the district of Caesarea Philippi.

This region was at the base of Mount Hermon, a mountain at which the fertility god Pan was worshipped. The site was of great offence to the Jews, containing a disproportionate amount of pagan temples and their attendant practices.

[ 6 : 22 ] The Roman worship thus stood in continuity with ancient Baal worship in the same location, and indeed the entire surrounding region seems to have had significant demonic connotations for much of the Old Testament period.

In this region, at the base of the mountain, was a famous cave from which a river flowed, which was thought to be an entrance and exit location for pagan gods. Ray van der Lijn writes, To the pagan mind, the cave at Caesarea Philippi created a gate to the underworld, where fertility gods lived during the winter.

They committed detestable acts to worship these false gods. Caesarea Philippi's location was especially unique, because it stood at the base of a cliff where spring waters flowed.

At one time, the water ran directly from the mouth of a cave set in the bottom of the cliff. The pagans of Jesus' day commonly believed that their fertility gods lived in the underworld during the winter and returned to earth each spring.

They saw water as a symbol of the underworld and thought that their gods travelled to and from that world through caves. To the pagan mind then, the cave and spring water at Caesarea Philippi created a gate to the underworld.

[ 7 : 29 ] They believed that their city was literally at the gates of the underworld. This mountain and its cave would likely have been in immediate proximity to Jesus, as he had this conversation with his disciples.

Putting the above three points together, here we have Jesus on a spiritually colonising mission, casting out and confronting demons from one location to the next. Immediately before entering this location, Jesus begins to speak to his disciples about the deceptive teaching of the religious leaders of Israel.

He then enters a particularly dark region of the land and asks his famous question. Moving on to a later section, he writes, Jesus clearly plays on words when he says, You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.

The New Testament speaks of the apostolic ministry as a redemptive historical foundation of the Christian church, Ephesians 2.20. Similar imagery is used of Abraham in the Old Testament, Isaiah 51.1-2.

I do not want to immediately discredit this connection, but it is worthy of note that Jesus does not say, You are Peter, and on you I will build my church. Why the play on words?

[ 8 : 38 ] Of course, there are many who argue that when Jesus says, This rock, he draws attention back to Peter's confession or to himself. No interpretation is completely natural. However, if we

recall the location of the apostles at the base of Mount Hermon, it seems we have a non-arbitrary reading, which preserves quite naturally Jesus' play on words.

What if Jesus is continuing the heavenly warfare theme that characterises the Gospel of Matthew? You are Peter, and on this rock, pointing to Mount Hermon, a consummate site of paganism, I will build my church.

This would be an astounding claim. Rather than being a site to be avoided, the Christian church is meant to go on the offensive against the land spiritually ruled by demonic powers and occupy it, especially in its strongholds.

And it is precisely in the sight of such powers that Christ will stake his flag and build his people. It could be retorted, perhaps, that Jesus speaks of Peter as this rock, in contrast to that rock, Mount Hermon.

However, it is unclear why he would make such a clarification, unsurprising as his avoidance of impure paganism would be to his Jewish theorists. But to storm the impure sites of paganism as the foundation of his kingdom, this would be a shocking claim to his Jewish hearers, and in concert with Jesus' constant reversal of rabbinic emphases, as well as later teaching in the New Testament.

[10:00] The connection to Matthew 28 is not arbitrary. This is a cryptic statement of the Great Commission. In conjunction with the below points, this reading is quite persuasive. Supporting this interpretation is the statement that immediately follows, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

As commonly noted, the image here is not of the church successfully defending itself against the forces of darkness. Gates are a defensive mechanism, and the image is rather one of the colonization of heaven.

What is more, the cave of Caesarea Philippi was seen by the pagans as a gate to the underworld. We can imagine Jesus literally pointing to a cave in the earth and saying, the gates of Hades will not overpower it, that is, will not subvert it from beneath.

Once again, the image is likely right in front of them, and Jesus is effectively saying, we're going in. This is a statement of the church militant against demonic forces and culture.

Fascinatingly, there is also a rabbinic teaching which associated the coming of the Messiah with the collapse of the gates of Baniyas, or Caesarea Philippi. So this is quite a developed and significant argument that Joe makes.

[11:07] I think it's important that you read the article in its complete form to get a sense of where he's going with this. One of the things that people will bring to this text is a number of prejudices about how certain backgrounds register.

And Joe's particular argument rests a lot upon background within local pagan symbolism and its worship and all these sorts of things.

It's about a specific cultural and geographical regional background that is not explicitly mentioned within the biblical text. And that can be a problem for a number of people.

The question of, do we have a lot of information from pagan sources or from sources outside of the Bible that refer to the cultural setting into which the biblical text was spoken that help us to interpret the text and not just help us but actually determine the meaning of certain texts.

So Joe's reading here is significant to notice this rock is the rock of the pagan site. It's not this rock as a general thing or this rock as a reference to Peter's confession or as a reference to something that's directly referenced within the text itself.

[12:30] It's a reference to something that the reader is supposed to presume is present in the immediate location. So they're supposed to know okay Caesarea Philippi has this particular pagan site and this rock this prominent rock is something that Jesus is obviously referring to in this particular place.

Likewise the gates of Hades. The gates of Hades is supposed to be a reference to this pagan the pagan stories that are associated with that cave and all these sorts of things.

Now that background was probably widely known. The other thing you'll notice is if you go on to Google Maps and take a satellite and then a street view look at the site of this place of the site of Caesarea Philippi and you'll see a very prominent rock and the cave within it and so it would not be surprising if Jesus were located at that site that these things would be prominent and in the immediate vicinity they would command your attention and so if you're talking about this rock in that specific location there would be a good chance that you're referring to that big feature behind you

that feature at the base of Mount Hermon this rock this rocky outcrop and then this cave within it and so it's not a it's not a reading without some weight within the original context if it's in that specific location of Caesarea Philippi so that's one thing to take into account but many readers will be nervous about this because this is not something that we see within the text it's not as if the text has expressly given us this background and so what does that mean for the perspicuity of scripture are we ending up having this background that the reader is supposed to know this background from pagan literature from pagan myths from cultural texts and beliefs and all these sorts of things that determine our interpretation of scripture in a way that shows maybe scripture itself the text taken on its own is not sufficient now I think that's a way of looking at the sufficiency of scripture that can be unhelpful we do need this background

I mean to even be able to interpret the text and translate it we need a lot of knowledge about all these different words and how they're used in other texts how they're used in associated languages these sorts of things we need this cultural background and these sorts of stories are rooted in a place and time they're rooted within a cultural location and certain things have meaning and weight that we may not be aware of from the text itself just taken in abstraction from that larger background so I think we do need to pay attention to some of the resonances that this text would have within the context of its original hearers and also within the context of the people who are hearing Jesus' statement for the first time so that's important so we do not I do not think we should dismiss the assumptions and the beliefs that Joe is operating in terms of the belief that there can be this significant background within the wider culture its stories its literature its myths its legends and the significance of particular locations within that context

I don't think that's an appropriate background to bring to the surface the question is how does that relate to the text and here I think it reaches some it runs into some problems that the text does not actually evoke this background now the background can be appropriate but if it's not evoked by the text the question is is it truly background for the text now the background can be there it can still be present but it may be a lot fainter and it may be a lot less determinative for the meaning of the text it may just be something connoted by the text something that the text is playing off against in the minds of some readers who are very attentive but it's definitely not the meaning of something that establishes the meaning of the text and so that is a problem for Joe's reading I think because the reference of this rock and the gates of Hades to these particular geographical cultic features these pagan sites is integral to his reading it's not just saying that they have this connotation and that Jesus is playing off against that meaning perhaps it's saying that this is what is being referred to and that is a far stronger case than many people would make who recognise these particular connections this background within this location now that geographical vicinity the idea that they are right next to these features is an important part of Joe's argument it's one of the things that gives weight to it as I've already pointed out if you were in that particular site that rock and that cave would stick out to you they would be very prominent but yet within the surrounding context there does not seem to be this foregrounding of that those particular features in the vicinity so it is introduced when Jesus came into the region of Caesarea

[18:15] Philippi it's the region it's not Caesarea Philippi itself likewise in Mark 8 when this passage is introduced now Jesus and his disciples went out to the towns of Caesarea Philippi and on the road he asked his disciples or in Luke and it happened as he was alone praying that his disciples joined him and he asked them saying who do the crowd say that I am and so Luke and Mark's account are significant here to maybe illumine part of what we have in Matthew as the background that Luke says that Jesus was alone praying and he was joined by his disciples presumably this is not at the heart of Caesarea Philippi this is not the heart of the city this is somewhere on the way where Jesus has gone off by himself and his disciples are joining him on the road and then they're striking up this conversation likewise within Mark it's on the way and they're going into the villages or the towns of Caesarea

Philippi this is the surrounding district this is not Caesarea Philippi itself so that is significant it weakens the connection of the geographical it weakens the strength of the geographical proximity of these particular sites it's similar to saying that in the Durham region as opposed to in Durham itself or in Palace Green Palace Green is the site at the heart of Durham that's right next to the cathedral and the castle if you were there and you talked about a church if you talked about a big building it would be obvious which building was in mind but when you go further out it becomes less prominent a landmark whereas you can see it in certain parts around Durham as you go further out

to the surrounding region and the villages round about it's not a prominent feature it's something that wouldn't necessarily come to mind it would be part of the background perhaps but it's not something that is so powerfully evoked by the context itself that it would seem to be integral to the meaning and so I think there's a problem with Joe's reading there

I don't think it actually is evoked by the text in the ways that he needs it to be one of the things he goes on to argue is that the Mount of Transfiguration plays into this reading that Mount Hermon is the mountain and this site was at the base of Mount Hermon Jesus ascends up Mount Hermon and then is transfigured on the mount that mountain that's above a pagan site and so it's a significant thing also seeing the Mount Hermon as the gates of heaven that there should be this transfiguration at the gates of heaven which is right above the gates of Hades now that's certainly an attractive reading there's a lot of things there that stick out and you think that's neat that's a lot of things that are attractive there but yet Matthew in the passage immediately following he says now after six days Jesus took Peter James and John his brother brought them up on a high mountain by themselves and was transfigured before them it's striking that it does not say brought them up Mount

Hermon or brought them up the mountain it's just a high mountain now I think we could rightly presume that this is Mount Hermon it seems to be it is the high mountain in the context it's the highest mountain within that particular region within Israel and so it would seem natural that this would be the mountain that's in mind but yet if they know the surrounding area so well if the reader of Matthew is presumed to be someone who knows all this important lore and these legends that are associated with Caesarea Philippi its specific location and he's giving weight to all of that and evoking all of that by his reference to Caesarea Philippi then why this vague reference to a mountain if it is indeed Mount Hermon the mountain that is seen to be the gates of heaven etc I think at these sorts of points the text does not seem to evoke the background that Joe draws attention to now that background again is still there but I don't think it's brought forward so that the reader is to connect it to

Jesus meaning and to make it integral to what he's saying what else is going on I think it would be helpful to step back and take a look at some of the other features of this text so there's part of the background of this text within the Old Testament the son of David who is going to build the house and so he's in covenant with God God will be to him a father he will be to God a son you are the Christ the son of the living God and then Christ immediately talks about building his assembly building his church and so this building is associated with his being the son of God it's a Davidic role he's the Messiah who builds the temple he's the one who builds the house for God's name the other thing to pay account to is the word play with Peter and the rock the word play I think is something that is weakened by Joe's reading Joe's reading rightly points out that

[ 23 : 45 ] Peter and the rock are not directly identified that Jesus does not say you are Peter and on you I will build my church he says you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church so there's not a complete identification there there is some distinction and that's worth paying into account but there are word plays here and there are even word plays as we go further on when Jesus is challenged Peter later on he says get behind me Satan you are an offence or stumbling block to me for you are not mindful of the things of God but the things of men and so Peter is the rock but then he becomes a stumbling block and so I think the significance of his name the significance of the association with Peter with the stone or the rock I think needs to be given more weight than Joe gives it there is something more that Jesus is doing here the identification of Peter as Peter elsewhere in the gospel of Matthew even before this Peter is spoken about as

Peter within the text but he's never addressed as Peter prior to this point this is the first time he's addressed as Peter in John's gospel chapter 1 verse 42 we read and he brought him to Jesus now when Jesus looked at him he said you are Simon the son of Jonah you shall be called Cephas which is translated a stone or Peter and so Peter was a name that had been given to Simon the son of John by Jesus it was a name that had a significance now we see in a number of occasions within the Old Testament that people are given names by God or significant events of people being given a name at the very at some point in the beginning of their lives after some significant event or occurrence so someone like Moses being given a name because he's drawn out of the water or Samuel as the one who's given because he's asked of the Lord and then we have something like Isaac being we have the name Isaac being given or we have the name Jacob the Jacob name as Israel is significant because he has wrestled with God and prevailed Abraham being given the

name Abraham rather than Abram that he will be a father of many nations and so all of these names are significant this naming is something that gives the character a new identity an identity that is established by God that will be fulfilled as the promises to them and God's purposes that he will fulfill through them come to pass and so Peter is given a name that I think has a similar character here Peter has just identified Jesus as the Christ the son of the living God and then immediately Christ turns and gives him an identity you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it the other thing to pay attention to is that there is a significance to Peter in particular here he is the one who is given the keys of the kingdom and he is the one in particular who has identified you are

Peter and so he's singled out in some way now as Protestants one of the sets of prejudices prejudices not in a pejorative sense but the prejudices or the biases that we bring to our reading of this text is our resistance to Roman Catholic readings which have often used this as the textual rock upon which argument for the papacy has been built and so our position to that is often seen in our stepping back and drawing back as far as possible from the associations that would give Peter a particular significance and certainly those that would suggest a continuing Petrine ministry within the church so this is a significant background for our readings because we're aware of the theological baggage that these passages have held and we want to resist that the reference though however does give

Peter significance that we do need to do justice to and I'm not sure that Joe's reading does enough with that does enough with the fact that Peter is being set apart and does enough with the wordplay that takes place Peter whether as rock or a stumbling stone whether it's the one who is faithful and the one who will be whether the one who's faithful or the one who is unfaithful whether the one who's the stumbling block of Christ's mission or the rock upon which he will build his church if that's the reading that seems to be part of what's going on here that I'm not sure that Joe takes enough account of what is some of the Old Testament background that we can look to here that can be helpful well first of all there's the background in the Old Testament with references to the gates of Hades whether that's in Isaiah 38 verse 10 or whether it's in somewhere like Job 38 17 or in some extra biblical literature like 3 Maccabees 5 51 or Wisdom 16 13 these passages and other passages that have similar sorts of references associate the gates of

[ 29 : 32 ] Hades with death so it's a known idiom it's not something that is necessarily unique to this location so for instance Isaiah 38 10 I said in the prime of my life I shall go to the gates of Sheol I'm deprived of the remainder of my years and so the gates of Sheol or the gates of Hades are the gates of death they're the gates that show the power of death it's the realm of death and it's power over people and it's power to overcome them the keys the keys the keys the keys the keys