

EXPLORATION: BIBLE

Important Archaeological Finds of the Bible #7—The Gates of Hell

In ancient times, the site pictured below was called Panias in honor of the Greek god Pan. The center of worship in Panias was a cave in which the headwaters of the Jordan River originate. This cave, located at the base of Mt. Hermon, was thought to be the place where Hermes (Pan's father) resided. Hermes was, in Greek mythology, the conductor of souls to Hades, thus this cave became known as the "Gateway to Hades or Hell." Ritual sacrifices (without doubt some human sacrifices/young virgins) were cast into a natural abyss reaching the underground waters at the back of the cave. If the victims disappeared in the waters this was a sign that the god had accepted the offering. If, however, signs of blood appeared in the nearby springs the sacrifice had been rejected.

The Cave in this picture was thought to be "The Gates of Hell"



These are the ruins of the Greek/Roman cultic site at Panias. In Jesus day, this was a Capital Roman city named Caesarea Philippi in honor of King Herod's son Phillip. (Photo by Chip Thompson, 2018)

The following story is found in Matthew 16:13-19, "When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi [Panias], He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"

The disciples offered several suggestions and then Jesus asked, "But who do you say that I am?"

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

Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of 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 Hell shall not prevail against it."

FIRST, it was no coincidence that this discussion happened on the road to Caesarea Philippi [Panias], the location of "The Gates of Hell." Jesus used this opportunity to teach his disciples several important lessons.

SECOND, there is a play on words used by Jesus in this passage that is not obvious when read in English. In Greek, when Jesus said to Simon you will be called "Peter" [Greek "Petros" - a small rock] he was basically calling Simon Peter, a rolling stone. But, when Jesus said, and upon "this Rock [Greek "Petra" - a massive immovable rock] I will build my church," Jesus was teaching an all-important truth. The Petra, the massive immovable Rock, the foundation of Jesus Christ's church was Peter's statement, "You are the Christ the son of the Living God." This statement is the rock, the truth upon which Christ's church was built.

And FINALLY, Jesus made an all-important statement about His Church, "The Gates of Hell shall not prevail against it." Panias, was a famous pagan worship site. For thousands of years, the Canaanites, a tribe of unfaithful Israelites, the Greeks, and the Romans had worshipped idols at this site. Unthinkable atrocities (human sacrifices) and rampant immorality (Pan was the goat god of fertility) had been done in the name of religion at this site. But, all of that would end with the founding of Jesus Christ's Church. The "Gates of Hell" would not prevail. In fact, the "Gates of Hell" would be stormed and overcome by Christ's Church.

**This is the face of PAN
(Full bodied pictures of Pan are
too immoral to depict in this newspaper)**



This stone altar was dedicated to the worship of Pan, the Goat god. (photo by Chip Thompson, Israel Museum, 2018)

Today, the site dedicated to Pan and his father Hermes is nothing more than an ancient ruin. No one has worshipped Pan or Hermes at this site for well over a thousand years. Why? Because Pan and Hermes were idols, with ears that cannot hear,

and eyes that cannot see. They were false gods and have gone the way of all false gods. Today they are only remembered in museums as relics of bygone civilizations.

Rodney Stark of the University of Washington, argued persuasively in his book: "The Rise of Christianity," that Christianity went from being a fringe sect in the Roman Empire to the dominate religion of Western Civilization... Stark believed that Christianity grew in the Roman Empire at a rate of 40 percent a decade, growing from around 1,000 (0.0017 percent of the population) in A.D. 40 to nearly 34 million (56.5 percent of the population) in A.D. 350. And, all of this happened while pagan Rome was trying to crush the Christian religion through intense persecutions and martyrdom of its saints.

Jesus Christ's church did and has triumphed over the false religions of our world. The Romans crucified Jesus and then guarded his tomb, but Jesus did not stay dead. Powerful emperors tried to crush Christianity with unthinkable persecutions which only caused the Christian church to grow. World empires tried to stamp out the memory of Christianity by destroying churches and burning Bibles, yet the Bible remains the best preserved ancient text of all times. In spite of the opposition of hell itself, Christ's church grew into the undisputed largest world religion of all times with 2.4 billion followers and it is still growing. What Jesus said about his Church has come to pass, The gates of hell did not prevail. The Petra, the Rock of Jesus Christ's gospel message is that He is indeed the Christ, the one and only Savior of the world.

Jesus Christ's gospel is so simple. The Apostle Paul explained it this way,

"Moreover, brethren, **I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you**, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you... For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: **that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures**" (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). **THAT'S IT - THAT IS THE GOSPEL.**

Jesus said it this way, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.** For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, **that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life... He who believes in the Son has eternal life;** and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:14-16, 36).

Every single person who has by faith believed this simple truth, is eternally joined to Jesus Christ and His church, and the gates of hell shall NEVER prevail against His church.