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Comment: *Why Caesarea Philippi?*

What was it about being in the neighbourhood of Caesarea Philippi that prompted Jesus to ask his disciples to tell him who people were saying he was? Is there any significance in his asking them the question about his identity at that particular place?

The episode is recounted by Mark (Mk 8: 27–33), Luke (Lk 9: 18–22), and — more famously — by Matthew (Matt 16:13–20). Luke makes no mention of Caesarea Philippi: he has Jesus 'praying alone', though, somewhat paradoxically, 'the disciples were with him'. All three evangelists record what the disciples report: people have been saying Jesus must be John the Baptist *redivivus*, or the long expected return of Elijah, or Jeremiah, or some other prophet. When Jesus asks who they themselves say that he is, St Peter answers for them: 'You are the Christ' (Mk 8:29); 'The Christ of God' (Lk 9: 20), and 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt 16:16).

The version in Matthew was, of course, in retrospect, to become prophetically the foundation text of the Roman primacy: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church' (verse 18). The words are inscribed in huge letters high up on St Peter's basilica in Rome.

But the history of the place reaches far into the dark backward and abysm of time. Moreover, if Matthew's version became the foundation text of the Petrine ministry the context always had far wider ramifications than might appear to the modern reader. According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, the Roman emperor Augustus gave the place then called Paneas — sacred to the Greek god Pan – to King Herod the Great. In due course his son Philip the Tetrarch built the city, which he called Caesarea Philippi, to distinguish it from Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast.

In short, a grand new Roman city was constructed in honour of the divine Caesar on the site of the spring that had been sacred from ancient times to the god Pan. It was in the neighbourhood of that double inheritance that the question of Jesus's identity was provoked.

The place has a lot of history, documented or revealed by archaeology. Originally, in the third century BC, a cult centre existed to counter the Semitic one at Dan to the south. When the (Seleucid) Greeks overran the region they turned it into a shrine to the god Pan. In sources contemporary with the New Testament the place is

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referred to as Caesarea Panias, as if juxtaposing Roman imperial grandeur and the power of natural religion.

Are we to suppose that the evangelist Matthew and his first readers knew nothing of this background? Or, for that matter, that Jesus and his disciples had no idea of the history of the site where he chose to ask them who they thought he was?

The place had a long future ahead. During the Jewish Revolt of 66–70 AD, the Romans imprisoned the Jews of Paneas. In 70 AD, after the revolt was suppressed, they held victory games, and many Jewish captives were slaughtered. If he was composing his gospel after that date, as scholars maintain, did Matthew know nothing of this terrible event?

From the fourth century and until the Arab conquest, Panias was an important Christian centre. During the Muslim period, the city was the capital of the Golan, its name changed to Banyas. Conquered by the Crusaders in 1129, it fell back under Muslim control in 1164. The fortifications were dismantled. Banyas gradually lost its importance. Today there is a Druze sanctuary in a whitewashed building on the cliff overlooking the spring.

That is not all. In 1920, the spring at Banyas proved a tricky problem for the committee that was deciding the border between the French and British mandates. The French prevailed, but the cause of dispute remains. In the 1960s, the Syrians planned to divert the water to irrigate part of the Golan. If they had succeeded they would have deprived Israel of what Israelis consider one of their essential water sources. On 10 June1967, the last day of the Six Day War, Israeli forces occupied the village of Banyas. Since then, Israel has been free to use the water for agriculture in the Hula Valley.

Since 1967, excavations have focused on the sacred precinct dedicated to Pan. In debris covering the temple fragments of many statues were found, destroyed by Christians and/or Muslims. The best preserved is that of a half life-size Artemis with a hunting dog attacking a hare at her feet. Other finds include large quantities of goats' bones — Pan was the goat-god. The Banyas National Park, which includes the excavations, is a great tourist attraction.

Whatever the evangelists knew of the history, the exchange between Jesus and his disciples that Mark and Matthew locate at Caesarea Philippi, the ancient Paneas, took place as it happens at the confluence of two of the most powerful realities that the new faith confronted: imperial Rome and Greek polytheism. It seems an appropriate place for Jesus to raise the question of his identity.

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