

Banias, Biblical Interpretation, and Peter's Confession

Lecture: 02-25 Lecture: Banias, Biblical Interpretation, and Peter's Confession | Israel 2026

SITE OVERVIEW

Location: Banias (modern name) / Caesarea Philippi (ancient/biblical name) / originally Pania (named after the god Pan); note: the Arabic pronunciation dropped the "P" sound, yielding "Banias"

Date of Visit: Not explicitly stated in the recording

Biblical References:

- Luke 2 (decree of Caesar Augustus)
- Matthew 16:13–20 (Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi)
- Matthew 17:1–8 (the Transfiguration)
- Mark (parallel account referencing "the villages of Caesarea Philippi")
- Implicit reference to the cursing of the fig tree (synoptic gospels) and the cleansing of the Temple

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The fig tree and Temple cursing: Jesus traveled from Bethany to the Temple Mount, cursing a fig tree for bearing no pague (pre-season fig) before entering the Temple and driving out the money changers ("My father's house had been made a den of thieves"). Dr. Schilling draws a deliberate typological parallel between the two acts of cursing.

Alexander the Great's death and the Diadochi wars: Upon Alexander's unexpected death in his thirties, his generals divided his empire. Ptolemaeus took Egypt; Seleucus took Assyria. They subsequently battled for control of the land bridge (Canaan), with a decisive engagement occurring in the large valley near the site. (Precise date not given for this battle.)

20 BCE — Caesar Augustus and Herod Philip: Dr. Schilling states the region came under Roman control and was granted by Caesar Augustus to Herod Philip. After the death of Herod the Great, his kingdom was divided among three sons; Philip ruled the northern territory of Gaulanitis and established his new capital here, naming it Caesarea Philippi in honor of Caesar Augustus.

Peter's Confession (Matthew 16:13–20): Somewhere in the region of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus posed the question of his identity to his disciples. Peter's identification of Jesus as Messiah is presented as a pivotal turning point enabling Jesus to begin revealing his impending death.

The Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8): Occurring six days after Peter's confession, in the same region. Dr. Schilling argues Mount Hermon (9,000 feet, the highest point in modern Israel) is the most geographically plausible site for the Transfiguration, rather than the traditional Mount Tabor in the Jezreel Valley.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The cave at Banias: In antiquity, this cave was believed to be bottomless. Josephus records attempts to reach the bottom that were never successful, leading to its association with the underworld entrance.

An earthquake in approximately 1837 diverted the spring's outflow from inside the cave to multiple locations beneath it. The spring now flows at approximately 800 gallons per second.

Niches in the cave walls once housed idols, associated with a temple to Pan on the site; visitors were directed to observe these during their exploration of the cave.

Ruins of Caesarea Philippi are visible across the street from the spring; the group passed them upon arrival by bus.

The Jordan River hydrology: This spring and the Dan spring are identified as the two major springs feeding the Jordan River. No tributaries enter the Jordan from within Israel itself; all additional sources originate in Lebanon to the north. Dr. Schilling noted Lebanese attempts to block these river sources to deprive Israel of fresh water.

DR. SCHILLING'S KEY POINTS

The pague (P-A-G-G-E) interpretation of the fig tree cursing: Jesus was not being unreasonable in cursing the fig tree "out of season." A pague is a pre-season fig that should be present on the tree before full fruit appears. The absence of pagues signals that no full fruit will follow. Dr. Schilling argues this is a deliberate typological link to Jesus's subsequent cursing of the Temple: no pre-season fruit in the Temple means no full-season fruit either. The entire final week in Jerusalem (attacks on the Sadducees, Pharisees, and money changers) reflects this theme. (Flagged as interpretive/typological reading, though grounded in botanical observation.)

"Gates of Hades" (Matthew 16:18) as a geographical statement: Jesus's declaration to Peter that "the gates of Hades shall not prevail" was spoken in the very location culturally and religiously understood to be the entrance to the underworld — the cave of Pan at Caesarea Philippi. The Baal/Asherah mythology held that Baal took Asherah into the underworld through this cave each winter, from which she emerged to bring spring. Dr. Schilling presents Jesus's word choice as intentionally confrontational to this local religious context.

The Transfiguration was primarily for Jesus, not the disciples: (Flagged as speculative/devotional interpretation.) Dr. Schilling argues that while the Transfiguration confirmed Peter's confession, its primary purpose was to provide Jesus himself with divine reassurance from the Father ("Abba") as the reality of his impending death became concrete. The analogy offered is the emotional weight that descends when a major life transition shifts from abstract idea to lived reality (e.g., the moment of physically leaving one's home).

Correction of the traditional Transfiguration site: The common tradition places the Transfiguration at Mount Tabor in the Jezreel Valley. Dr. Schilling challenges this, arguing that the text situates Jesus in the region of Caesarea Philippi immediately before the event, making Mount Hermon the geographically logical "high mountain."

Catholic vs. Protestant interpretation of Matthew 16:18: Dr. Schilling briefly presents both positions without personal adjudication:

- Catholic: Peter himself is the rock; he becomes the first pope.
- Protestant: Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah is the rock upon which the church is built.

Disciples' delayed understanding of Messiah: The disciples struggled to identify Jesus correctly because their conception of Messiah was shaped by the prevailing Jewish expectation of a military liberator who would expel Rome. It was not until Peter's confession that Jesus could begin openly teaching about his death.

GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Relationship to other biblical sites:

- Bethany → Temple Mount (fig tree and Temple cleansing narrative)
- Caesarea Philippi → Mount Hermon (proposed Transfiguration site, approximately 6 days' journey implied by Matthew 17:1)
- Caesarea Philippi → Jericho → Jerusalem (8-day walk, then a 20-mile ascent from 1,400 feet below sea level to 3,200 feet above sea level)

Strategic significance: The site sits at the northern end of the land bridge between Egypt and Mesopotamia/Assyria, making it a perennial military and political flashpoint (Ptolemaic vs. Seleucid conflicts; Roman administrative control under Herod Philip).

Water and terrain:

- The Baniyas spring flows at approximately 800 gallons per second and is the second-largest spring feeding the Jordan River (the Dan spring is the largest).
- Mount Hermon rises to 9,000 feet and is the highest point in modern Israel.
- The Jordan River system flows south from these northern springs into the Sea of Galilee.
- No rivers from within Israel proper feed the Jordan; all additional northern sources are in Lebanon.
- Fig trees are present at the site and were used as a teaching object at the opening of the session; the group was shown piques on the limbs overhead.

QUOTABLE MOMENTS

“If you don’t have any pre-season fruit, you can’t have any full-season fruit.” — Dr. Schilling, connecting the fig tree cursing to the Temple cleansing typologically.

“Isn’t it interesting what Jesus said? To Peter: ‘You are Peter... the gates of Hades will not stand against you.’ This was the gates of hell.” — On the geographical irony of Jesus’s declaration at Caesarea Philippi.

“I just think Jesus needed a hug from Abba.” — Dr. Schilling’s pastoral summary of his interpretation of the Transfiguration’s purpose.

“They’re slow learners. He’s always saying, ‘Oh ye of little faith, where’s your faith?’” — On the disciples’ prolonged failure to grasp Jesus’s identity.

“It was not until the garage door comes down and the car pulls out of the driveway — reality hits.” — Analogy used to explain the emotional moment of the Transfiguration for Jesus.

PERSONAL NOTES

Follow-up question: What primary sources (beyond Josephus) document the belief in the cave’s bottomlessness or its cultic use for Pan/Baal worship? Verify Josephus reference for specificity.

Verify: The precise year of the earthquake diverting the Banias spring — Dr. Schilling states “1830-something, 37, I think.” Confirm as 1837.

Flag for further research: The vague botanical claim — confirm in secondary agricultural or botanical literature on Levantine fig cultivation and whether this interpretation appears in peer-reviewed biblical scholarship.

Note on tone: Portions of this session are devotional/homiletical in nature (particularly the Transfiguration discussion and the personal family anecdote). These should be distinguished from strictly historical or archaeological claims in any formal academic use.

Speculative content flagged: The interpretation of the Transfiguration as primarily for Jesus’s benefit is explicitly devotional and not a mainstream scholarly position; it should be cited as Dr. Schilling’s personal theological reading.