

The Significance of Yeshua's Ekklesia

In Matthew 16, when Yeshua took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, the location played a significant role in the message that He gave them. This area today is known as Banias. It is where the Jordan River springs out of the rocks at the base of Mt Hermon. It was there that Yeshua initiated a discussion on His identity for the first time.

The Pharisees had already identified Yeshua as a blasphemer and denied that He had any authority. Now, we learn that the people who had been following Yeshua identified Him as being a prophet on par with John the Baptist, Elijah and Jeremiah, which is still an inadequate recognition. When given the opportunity to provide his own answer, Simon Peter did so with great discernment by calling Him the Messiah and the Son of God (v. 16), which means He is both our Redeemer and our atonement for sin (Isa 53), and He is fully divine and Lord over our lives (Isa 9:6-7).

Yeshua then revealed the implications of Peter's declaration. As He often did, He used figurative language, and that has led to some confusion among readers of the Bible. When Yeshua said in verse 18, "you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church," Roman Catholicism interprets this to mean that the church, as an institution will be built on the authority of Peter, followed by the Popes. But the problem with that interpretation is that it ignores context.

- The grammatical context of Yeshua's common way of communication shows a preference for figurative language. He used a play on words involving two terms for rocks. *Petros* is the Greek equivalent of the Aramaic word *kefa*, which is translated as "Peter" but is used commonly in reference to smaller rocks or stones that are movable. The other term used by Yeshua is *petra*, which refers to a rock that is "massive or immovable." So we can see that they are distinctive terms. In verse 18, He emphasized that He would build upon the *petra* (a massive, immovable rock), not upon the *Petros* (Peter, the movable rock).
- The textual context shows that Yeshua's declaration came immediately after Peter stated that Yeshua was the Messiah and the Son of God, which must be placed at the center of the meaning of the immovable rock. Notice also that Yeshua called it "My church," not Peter's church or one belonging to the apostles or popes. If He had intended to support the Catholic position, He would have said, "upon *Petros*" or "upon *you* I will build *your* church."
- The geographic context is also important. At that moment, they were standing in an area where there is a massive rock cliff known as the "Rock of the Gods." It has a large cave where the water flowing out of it was so deep that, according to Josephus, it was impossible to measure (*Wars 1:21:3*). This place was initially used by the Canaanites for Baal worship that involved child sacrifice. Then the Greeks came and made it a place for worshipping the mythological god Pan, who was depicted as half man/half goat (the modern name Banias is derived from Pan). The Greeks engaged in degenerate fertility rites involving humans and goats, as well as sacrificing goats that were tossed into the water of the cave. In Leviticus 17:7, Adonai warned the Israelites against this practice of sacrificing to goat demons. The cave was known as the "Gates of Hades" because it was believed to be the portal to the underworld. Later, during Roman rule, they adapted it for their own manner of religious observance. So it was a place that represented a long history of religious institutions.

Yeshua had intentionally brought the disciples to this spot in order to show them a rock that represented the religious institutions of men, and how corrupt they were. So it is very apparent by

this context that He was not advocating for creating another religious institution based on the authority of men. In fact, He said that, like the cave right before them, “the gates of Hades would not overpower” what He was building (v. 18). In other words, religious institutions would not ultimately prevail. Ironically, establishing another institution is exactly what the Roman Catholic church ended up doing by granting full authority to mere human beings and saints in heaven.

By using the word *petra*, Yeshua did make it clear that He was building something massive and immovable, but not like institutional religion. The immediate context of Matthew 16 shows that Yeshua made His proclamation about the rock immediately after Peter declared that Yeshua was the Messiah and the Son of the Living God. The greater context of Scripture further informs our understanding. In Matthew 7:24-25, Yeshua used a parable in which He called His words the *petra* (rock) that cannot fall and is immovable. Altogether, then, Yeshua showed that the immovable rock is the truthful message that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel and the Son of the Living God.

So that should further inform our understanding of the nature of what Yeshua was building in verse 18, namely the Greek word *ekklesia*. This word combines the verb *kaleo* – meaning “call” with the prefix *ek* – meaning “out.” So it literally means “called out ones.” It implies a collection of people being called out with a purpose. The collective aspect is best expressed with the words “congregation or assembly.” That is why the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the *Tanakh* during the second temple period, translated the Hebrew word *kehila*, meaning “assembly” with *ekklesia*. So in the day when the New Testament was written, *ekklesia* conveyed the concept of a “congregation or assembly.”

The origin of the word “church”

When the first translations of the Bible into English were completed, *ekklesia* was rightly rendered as “congregation.” That was true in the first translation by William Tyndale, and subsequent versions like the Coverdale Bible, the Matthew Bible, the Great Bible, and the Bishop's Bible, all written in the 1500's. The Geneva New Testament of 1560 was the first to use the word “church” instead. This term came from the Middle English *chirche*, which came from the Old English *cirice* (pronounced chir-EE-che), which came from the Latin word *circus*, meaning “circle.”

Before Christianity came to England, the Druids, Celts and Saxons sat in circles when gathering for their times of worshipping false gods. As Christianity began replacing those pagan gathering places, their buildings and outdoor stones were often converted for Christian worship. So Christians of that era retained the practice of sitting in circles.

When King James ordered his translation in 1611, not only was “church” employed again, it was mandated by King James himself. Among his fifteen instructions to the translators, he stated: “The old ecclesiastical words are to be kept, viz.: as the word Church is not to be translated as Congregation, etc.” James wanted to promote the retention of the custom of sitting in circles with his translation, in spite of its divergence and incompatibility with the original language. Because of the influence of King James, *ekklesia* has substantially lost its emphasis on people, and has been replaced by an emphasis on a place.

This change has contributed to the shift toward the establishment of institutions, which is the very thing that Yeshua was teaching against. The purity of Yeshua's message on that day at Caesarea Philippi would have been much more evident today if the translators had remained consistent in showing that Yeshua was building a great congregation of people who were called out to declare that He is the Messiah and the Son of God.