

# OpenTheo

## Is Peter the Rock on which Christ's Church is Built?

May 12, 2018



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Joseph Minich recently wrote a thought-provoking article about Jesus's statement to Peter concerning the rock on which he would build his Church:

<https://calvinistinternational.com/2018/05/07/the-conquest-of-the-rock-a-new-look-at-matthew-16-and-the-keys-of-the-kingdom/>

Within this video, I question Joseph's reading, present an alternative position, and discuss some of the differences in hermeneutical instincts that give rise to such contrasting readings of texts by people who might have much else in common.

For more on the Jeremiah background, see Bruce Dahlberg's JBL article, 'The Typological Use of Jeremiah 1:4-19 in Matthew 16:13-23': <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3266036>

To get a sense of the significant and prominent features of the site to which Joseph is referring, take a look at this Google Streetview perspective on the location: <https://goo.gl/nsrzEV>

## Transcript

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.

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.

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, 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? 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 Barjona, 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.

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. 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 could 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.

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 Vanderlaan 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.

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 dark region of the land and asks his famous question. Moving on to a later section, he writes Jesus does not say, you are Peter and on you I will build my church.

Why the play on words? 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 occupied 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 hearers. 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.

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 Banias or Caesarea Philippi. So this is quite a developed and significant argument that Joe makes.

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 a 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 texts were 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. 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, 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 show 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 those particular features in the vicinity. So it is introduced when Jesus came into the region of Caesarea 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 crowds 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'd 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 roundabout, 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 at 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 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 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 law 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 Peter and the rock are not directly identified. 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 account.

But there are word plays here and there are even word plays as we go further on when Jesus is challenged by Peter later on. He says get behind me Satan you are an offense or a stumbling block to me for you are not mindful of the things of God but the things of man. 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 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 is 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 Abraham 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's 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 this our reading of this text is our resistance to Roman Catholic readings which have often used this as the textual rock upon which an 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 a 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 as the one who is faithful and the one who will be whether the one who's faithful or the one who's 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 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 down to the gate 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 its power over people and its power to overcome them.

So if we're looking at the wider context in the Old Testament and the wider context in Jewish literature, this reference to the gates of Hades is something that is already in existence. Whether that is the only thing that's in mind is a different question. Whether those terms are used in the same, that idiom is used in the same way here as it is used in the Old Testament, again that's another question.

But the idea that this is clearly a reference to this particular gates of Hades is weakened somewhat if we keep in mind that there is this other background that can be that can be drawn upon. A further thing to pay in pay account to pay attention to is the fact that in

the Old Testament there are similar sorts of accounts when God identifies someone, gives them a new identity, a new calling, a new purpose, expresses what he will do with them. And we find this in the prophetic literature as prophets are set apart for their ministry.

And a particular significant account here I think is found in Jeremiah 1 verses 4 to 19 which I'll read out. Then the word of the Lord came to me saying before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I sanctified you and I ordained you a prophet to the nations. Then said I our Lord God behold I cannot speak for I am a youth.

But the Lord said to me do not say I'm a youth for you shall go to all to whom I send you and whatever I command you you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces for I am with you to deliver you says the Lord. Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth and the Lord said to me behold I have put my words in your mouth see I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms to root out and pull down to destroy and to throw down to build and to plant.

Moreover the word of the Lord came to me saying Jeremiah what do you see and I said I see a branch of an almond tree. Then the Lord said to me you have seen well for I'm ready to perform my word. And the word of the Lord came to me a second time saying what do you see and I said I see a boiling pot and is facing away from the north.

Then the Lord said to me out of the north calamity shall break forth on all the inhabitants of the land for behold I am calling all the families of the kingdoms of the north says the Lord. They shall come and each one set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah. I will utter my judgments against them concerning all their wickedness because they have forsaken me burned incense to other gods and worship the works of their own hands.

Therefore prepare yourself and arise and speak to them all that I command you do not be dismayed before their faces lest I dismay you before them. For behold I have made you this day a fortified city and an iron pillar and bronze walls against the whole land against the kings of Judah against its princes against its priests and against the people of the land. They will fight against you but they shall not prevail against you for I am with you says the Lord to deliver you.

Now the background in this text I think is significant. I believe it's significant primarily as conceptual background rather than an explicit and highly developed parallel. There are parallels and I think there are allusions here but I think the significance of this background is primarily conceptual.

It's something that shows part of how these realities work, how the prophet is set up as the agent of God's work, as one that is a site that is battled against. It sets up imagery and it also enables us to see how Peter's role might be understood within an existing

paradigm which is the paradigm offered by Jeremiah. Now there are a few things to pay attention to here.

First of all the potential parallel between binding and loosing and the prophetic plucking up and pulling down, destroying and overthrowing, building and planting. These two terms alongside each other, this binding and loosing is seen as a divine work carried out through the prophet or through the divinely established agent and I think the parallel between Peter and the one who's binding and loosing and the work of Jeremiah is helpful for us understanding what is taking place here. The background of Jeremiah has already been maybe brought to the surface within this text because Matthew alone among the gospel writers mentions Jeremiah immediately preceding.

He says so they say some say John the Baptist, some Elijah and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. And so Jeremiah is brought to the surface at this point and the significance of this may be slight but later on in the passage in Matthew 17 after the transfiguration Jesus identifies John the Baptist with Elijah, the Elijah that was to come. And so the significance of Jeremiah as a figure might be might be raised at this point.

So you have these three figures mentioned John the Baptist, Elijah and Jeremiah one of the prophets. John the Baptist is identified with Elijah. Now is there any significance of a Jeremiah type figure and who could this be? Jeremiah is made into a fortified city, a stronghold that opponents will not prevail against.

The language of prevailing against I think is significance and it's one of the stronger parallels between these two passages. Peter will be established as a rock that the gates of Hades will not prevail against. The reference to the gates of Jerusalem is also interesting.

In Jeremiah one the gates of Jerusalem are the site of the thrones of the nations being set up. Jerusalem and the cities of Judah are being besieged successfully by the kings of the nations who bring their forces to the gates of Jerusalem and set up siege and build their set up their thrones. But the fortified city of the prophet which is juxtaposed with Jerusalem will stand fast and prove impenetrable.

So all these different people will be arrayed against it. All the kings and the princes and the priests and the people of the land will be arrayed against this stronghold of Jeremiah and he will withstand them. Whereas the stronghold of Jerusalem will fall to the kings of the north.

Holding these two things together I think is illuminating. The juxtaposition, the kings of the north, the people that gathered and put their call together, this military assembly, create their thrones at the gates of Jerusalem and battle against Jerusalem. They are paralleled with Jeremiah himself.

Jeremiah is the stronghold and they are God's forces arrayed against Jerusalem. On the other hand Jerusalem is the stronghold that falls before God's forces and they are the forces that besiege Jeremiah and yet fail. So there are these two juxtaposed images.

The Jeremiah as the one who is the besieged city but then also accompanied by these forces that are besieging and successfully overtaking, overthrowing the people that are besieging him. Then on the other hand you have the gates of the city, the gates of Jerusalem that do not prevail against the force that God brings down from the north and the besieging force of Jerusalem that does not prevail against or overthrow Jeremiah the prophet. So that significant parallel I think needs to be taken into account.

It also enables us to see more of the military overtones of the term for assembly, the church, the ecclesia, that this is an assembly of people. Much of the kings of the north are called together so the church is called out as this great assembly, this military assembly that is engaged in conflict. Jeremiah is a prophet who is set against Jerusalem in conflict with Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the besieged city and Jeremiah is the city besieged by Jerusalem. He heralds its coming overthrow. Immediately after Peter's confession Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem in verse 21 and I think that again is significant.

Flesh and blood don't reveal Peter's confession to him. God puts his words in Peter's mouth much as God puts his words in Jeremiah's mouth. This is significant I think for understanding what might be meant with Peter being the rock, what's being referred to there because it's not a direct association, an immediate association with Simon.

Simon and his identification with the, there's a sort of ambivalent relationship that Simon has with his rockness. It's on one hand he is someone who's Peter the rock who might be the rock upon which God builds his, Christ builds his church. On the other hand he can be Peter the rock, the stone that's a stumbling stone, an obstacle to Christ's mission and so there's an ambivalence to his identity at this point but Christ's commitment that he will build his church upon this rock I think shows this association with Peter's name is one that will be fulfilled with a future identity that God is going to establish and that's in Peter's apostleship.

It's in the same way as Jeremiah is being set up as the prophetic identity of this Jeremiah, not just Jeremiah the young kid who doesn't have words but it's, and who might be afraid of people, but it's Jeremiah the one who is made strong, the one who's made into a fortress, the one who has God's words put within him and he is the one that will prevail. In the same way Simon the son of John is a fairly weak and pathetic guy in certain respects. He has plenty of, he's good at bragging and he's got a lot of confidence but before God puts his words in his mouth, before God strengthens and equips him and empowers him by his spirit, he's not going to be any sort of suitable rock for the church.

He's just going to be a stone of stumbling. But what we see within his confession is a first indication of what he is going to be. He is going to be the primary witness, the leading witness in Christ's mission.

He's going to be the one who in the acts of the apostles, he is the one whose acts lead the way. He is the one who will be the pioneer, the primary foundation upon which the church will be built. So this I think is significant.

It helps us to understand why Peter and the rock are not simply associated. Why it's not you are Peter and on you I will build my church. There is something about the identity of this rock that will only be established as God forms Peter into this stronghold, as he forms him into this firm, this firm rock that will withstand all the things that batter against it.

But that hasn't happened yet. We see an inkling of it. We see a glimpse of what Peter will become in his confession but it has not yet come about.

Another thing that some have drawn attention to, Bruce Dahlberg in an article which is very helpful in this subject, though there's a lot of speculation within it that I don't find convincing, he argues that there is an association between Jeremiah and the keeping of the treasures of the temple. So the gatekeepers of the temple in 1 Chronicles 9 26-27 have the charge of all the sacred contents and they have the contents, the charge of the doors. In 2 Maccabees 2 4-8 there is an apocryphal suggestion that Jeremiah has charge over the temple treasures.

So presumably has the keys of the building as well. And so this parallel with Peter is the one who's like a sort of Jeremiah, one who's being set up as a stronghold against all the forces that will be arrayed against him, the one upon whom God will achieve his purpose, that that parallel might be a parallel with Jeremiah. What else can this tell us about Peter's role? Now I think this is helpful in thinking about who Peter is.

What is some of the background of Jeremiah that helps to unpack this? Now as I've said I don't believe that this background is necessarily integral to understanding the meaning of this text. In other words you don't have to know this Jeremiah background to be able to interpret Matthew 16. You could interpret it without it.

But what this background does, unlike I might say, unlike the background that Joe brings forth, this is not necessary to interpret the text. But yet it is significant background that can clue us into key details within the text and help us to unpack certain things. So here are a few things that it enables us to do.

It provides biblical background for the concept of binding and loosing. The biblical background is the background of prophetic ministry as God fulfills his purpose through the prophet and as he plucks up and pulls down, as he builds and he plants. He's the one

who, the prophet is the one through whom God acts.

The prophet is significant within this account then. He's not just someone who's reporting what God is doing but he's the one through whom God acts. This gives us a paradigm for considering the relationship between the binding and loosing and divine authority.

And so the divine word is placed within the mouth of the prophet and he must faithfully deliver it. Again there is a danger if the prophet does not do what he's supposed to do he can become a failure. He can be dismayed.

Therefore prepare yourself and arise and speak to them all that I command you. Do not be dismayed before their faces lest I dismay you before them. And so in the same way if Peter fails, if Peter does not fulfill his command and his charge, he won't be binding and loosing on his own authority.

Rather he'll be dismayed in the same way as he's associated with Satan in the passage immediately following this as the rock becomes a stumbling stone. And so both of those word plays are significant. You are Peter, you're the rock on which I'll build my church.

You are Peter, you are Satan, Peter, the stumbling stone that is the obstacle to my mission. And so in both cases he's a stone but in one case it's a stone on which things are to be built. In another way it's an obstacle.

And so the prophet can fail if he does not faithfully fulfill his charge. It focuses our attention first and foremost upon the historical role played by the Apostle Peter in the founding of the church. So this is not just a general thing that is some ecclesial prerogative, the rites of the keys of the kingdom or binding and loosing.

These have general relation, they have relationship to a more general thing that is done within the church. But there's a very specific reference here to a historical ministry that Peter is going to perform. A ministry that is unique, a ministry that is particular and peculiar to him.

He is the one through whom God will open the door of faith to the Gentiles. He's the one who will deliver the message, he's the one who will validate that as it were before the Jerusalem church. He will declare what God has done, he's the one who is involved in baptising the people of Cornelius' house.

He's also the one who with John goes to Samaria and is the means by which they receive the spirit after they received the message of Philip. And so he opens these doors or God opens these doors through him. He is the significant leading figure in the early stage of the church's ministry.

Likewise he's the one who speaks the sermon on the day of Pentecost, the one who calls

Israel through repentance and he's the one who leads the church in that primary stage of its mission. It also is a background that brings to the reader a greater sense of the conflict between Jerusalem and the prophet, between the gates of Hades and the prophet that is withstanding those forces that are opposing, the forces of death but also forces that are concentrated in a particular site. This site of demonic activity in Israel was not focused ultimately on Mount Hermon, it was focused in Jerusalem itself.

It was focused in the site where Satan was most active and that's where the showdown took place. That again is significant. It also presents the rockness of Peter, the fact that he is this stone.

He's one who is divinely fortified by God. It's not just some natural intrinsic quality of Peter, rather it's a prophetic and fortification of Peter for his mission. And in a number of cases in scripture we see God preparing the prophet for his ministry, whether that's touching the lips of Isaiah with the burning coal or preparing or telling Moses that he will give him the words to speak and then giving him Aaron as a mouthpiece.

In these sorts of cases we see the prophet is prepared for his ministry in that particular point. Now all of these things then enable us to think about what Peter does. Peter is a foundation of the church.

The apostles more generally were foundations of the church. The church is built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets in Ephesians 2 20 20 or Revelation 21 6 14 we see again the foundation that the prophets or that the apostles provide for the church. Now it's significant because this is not a continuing Petrine ministry or office within the church.

Rather it's a unique ministry that occurs in history through which the church is established and upon which it is built. Now this foundation was already laid by AD 70. This was a foundation that was established in the beginning of the church and also it helps us to see why Peter is so often a figure that's made prominent within the text as a leading figure of the apostles, as one who has a ministry to perform within God's greater purpose in redemptive history.

He's not just someone who witnesses to the redemptive history but he is an agent within redemptive history by which by whom significant redemptive historical once for all events occur. The foundation of the church, this revelation of the mystery of the gospel going to the Gentiles, this is something that occurs through the once for all ministries of people like Peter and Paul. And in Peter, in the case of Paul, Paul also draws attention to this in Galatians when he writes of himself in Galatians chapter 1. But when it pleased God who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through his grace to reveal his son in me that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me but I went to Arabia and returned again to Damascus.



So he argues within this passage the gospel that he received was something that he did not receive second hand. He did not get this through the apostles but directly from the revelation of God and he fulfills this ministry as one who has been set apart from his mother's womb much as Jeremiah was set apart from his mother's womb as having a particular and unique prophetic ministry to perform. Now this helps us to see how Peter's confession, Peter's witness and Peter the man, this unique historical person all come together.

So Peter, his witness, his confession to Jesus is integral to who he is as a prophet. This is what will define him as the apostle. As the apostle he is the one who bears witness to Christ, who declares Christ to be the son of the living God, who declares him to be the Messiah, all these sorts of things.

He's also the one through whom God will act to bind and to loose, to open up this new door of faith to the Gentiles. So he's not just proclaiming a message of what Christ has done in a once for all sense. He is also performing a once and for all act as God operates through him and as he acts according to God's command.

And so Peter is not just a figure who bears witness but he is a figure through whom God acts decisively and it's one of the reasons why we have a book called the Acts of the Apostles because that's part of redemptive history too. The foundation of the church is not just the afterword of what Christ has done, it's the continuation and the culmination in certain respects of what Christ has established. Christ laid the cornerstone and now we see the foundation and the building of this temple taking place.

And as the foundation is established, as we have things like Pentecost, as we have the spread of the church out, Peter is the leading figure within that. And so like Jeremiah, Peter has God's word placed within him and becomes a manifestation of the power and the efficacy of the word and is as an actor, an agent, a means by which that word takes effect within history. This background I think helps us to understand why Roman Catholic readings, what they get right, but also what they get wrong.

There's absolutely no reference to a continuing Petrine office here. Rather there's a reference to Peter's unique and distinct role at the foundation of the church. The binding and the loosing particularly refer to that foundation period and his office is again something that is peculiar to him.

No one else has quite the same role as Peter and for this reason he is set apart as the rock on which God will build his church. Peter the apostle is that rock but yet the other apostles will share in being this foundation. But yet this is not a foundation that's continually needing to be relayed.

No, it's a once for all work that God performs through Peter. Peter leads the way. Bringing all of these things together, I think it's helpful to think about the backgrounds

that we bring to texts, the assumptions that we bring to texts, the principles and the hermeneutical judgments and instincts that we bring.

So within this particular case we can see the weight that for instance I would give to biblical background. Something like Jeremiah is something I'd put a lot of weight on relative to some of the background that you might find in pagan literature for instance or in pagan legend. That background is not something that I'd focus on to quite the same extent as the biblical background which I would argue within the textual presentation of this is generally far more pronounced, far nearer to the surface, far more readily evoked.

Again that pagan background is not to be dismissed. The background in literature and legend and all these sorts of things that Joe brings forward. However to evoke that background we need far stronger indicators within the text that we actually find in this particular occasion.

When the New Testament wants to refer to a particular location it can do that very particularly. It can talk about something occurring at a very specific location by the sheep gate for instance or a specific geographical feature can be mentioned. This is not something that is rare within the New Testament.

That we do not find it I think is significant. Likewise within Matthew we have a lot of mountain imagery going on. We have the Sermon on the Mount which is where Christ delivers as it were this new law that parallels with Moses delivering the law from Mount Sinai.

We have the Mount of Transfiguration, this very high mountain which is associated in some ways with Sinai, the realm where Moses saw the transfigured, and where he saw the glory of God pass before him. So there's these parallels being drawn there. Matthew playing with this symbolism again in the high mountain that Jesus is taken to by Satan.

As he goes up into this mountain he sees all the kingdom of the earth etc. So mountain imagery is present both in that more general sense. It's also present in very particular senses.

So the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount are constantly being played off against each other at the end of the Gospel. We see Jesus moving from the Mount of Olives to the Temple Mount and then back to the Mount of Olives and then that movement to and fro establishes a tension between those two mountains, a symbolic tension that is expressive in part of the judgment that is taking place upon the Temple and this setting apart of somewhere opposed to it, over against it as it were. So when we're reading this particular passage and there isn't a reference to the mountain, there isn't a reference to that specific rock in that context, and then the reference to the mountain in chapter 17 is just the vague a mountain, a very high mountain.

There seems to be a tension there between Matthew's typical mode of operation and what we're seeing taking place here. We'd expect him to foreground it a bit more, to give a bit more details, to be a bit more specific in his reference, to play a bit more with the symbolism of the mountain if it is so significant as Joe argues. Now these connotations don't need to be dismissed.

The meaning of scripture is not something that is, it's not something that needs to be restricted to one particular set of echoes or one particular set of allusions or an evoked background that is just one exclusive set of references. There are often in these sorts of texts multiple areas of background that are being evoked and there are multiple connotations as well. Jesus' statement, no doubt it seems to me, would play with some of the connotations of this pagan site.

This great rock and this cave that is associated with Hades within it, that would be important connotation for Jesus' statement. Jesus' statement would be opposing the work of his temple building, of his building of his church, with this pagan site. So his work is going to be this great temple building, it's going to be upon a different sort of rock over against the rock of this temple site.

Now that is helpful background, it's a helpful connotation and juxtaposition but does not necessarily function as integral to the text in the way that Joe argues. Bringing all this together then we can recognise the significance of the assumptions that we bring to texts. Now I come with a series of my own assumptions about the weight to give different things.

I come with assumptions about how we are to approach the Roman Catholic readings for instance. I don't have the same resistance to associating Peter with the rock or making some of these strong associations with binding and loosing that Peter's ministry, that many Protestants would have. That means that I read this text in a slightly different way than they would.

Likewise when I hear terms such as gates of Hades, my first port of call is the Old Testament. Where do we see that expression, those expressions being used in the Old Testament? Next port of call would be things like intertestamental literature, various other parts of the Jewish background. And then I would think about pagan background.

Now in certain contexts that pagan background will come, will be slightly more prominent. If this were directly in the centre of Caesarea Philippi I would think okay we need to take the pagan background a bit more seriously here because it's in the immediate context. Whereas in the more general region it's not so pronounced.

Anyway I'm reaching a point where I'm rambling and I thought it would be an interesting discussion to have. I hope you found it helpful. I'll be interested to hear your thoughts in the comments and again highly recommend you read Joe's article and then we can have

this conversation and think about what it means.

Thank you.