

Sacred Spaces and Pagan Places in Spiritual Warfare

In 1995 I visited Israel for the first time. Our tour took us to Caesarea Philippi located at the base of Mount Hermon. At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks his disciples the question that we all must answer:

Who do men say that I am? And then, “Who do you say that I am?”

Our guide, Naftali Cohen, said that where we stood was called The Gates of Hell. A craggy cliff extended along the base of the mountain many yards long and along the rocky ridge that we were facing was an opening large enough to reach a hand inside.

We were told that if we tossed in a coin, it would not reach bottom. I threw in a penny, and did not hear the corresponding splash. Its depths were not fathomed, hence the name. My surprise was that “gates of hell” was a real place. It was an eerie place. That opening crevice seemed to extend all along that cliff. Was hell down there? I had always given a metaphorical gloss to the “gates of hell” passage. But, Jesus was giving an object lesson, and an important one.

It was here, at “the gates of hell” that Peter makes his confession of faith and answers Jesus question correctly, “Thou art the Christ [Messiah], the Son of the Living God.” (Matthew 16.16) Jesus tells him that flesh and blood has not revealed this to him but His Father who is in heaven. Jesus continues,

“And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16.18)

Several interpretations have emerged regarding that rock. Catholics consider Peter the rock upon which the church is founded. Others think it is the “rock of revelation” as only God can reveal in man’s heart the identity of Jesus as son of God, or his identity as Yeshua Ha Mashiach. I didn’t think too much more about this location, or its importance. Trying to keep places straight in Israel made my head swim. There was so much to see.

Of course, I had reflected on the passage in Matthew 16 which connects Jesus’ reference to two prophecies in Genesis which foretold the coming of Jesus.

I understood these prophecies foundational to describe the on-going battle Satan wages against God to destroy the Jews. Why? Jesus would be born a Jew in a Jewish nation to a Jewish Mother. He is the prophesied “Seed of the woman” (Gen. 3.15). What if Satan could prevent this birth from happening? How would mankind be saved?

So, a spiritual war ensues. Genesis and other Bible books tell of the attacks on the birth line of Jesus. What if significant characters like Sarah, Rebekah, Tamar, Moses, or Esther had been taken out? Would there be a Messiah? Satan’s thinking perhaps, but Satan cannot thwart the sovereign plan of God. However, he continues his assault on the Jews and Israel is to prevent Jesus’ Second Coming to the Mount of Olives as announced by an angel at his ascension.

Genesis 22 first mentions “the gate” during the offering of Isaac, a type of God’s offering His only begotten son. The Angel of the Lord stays Isaac’s hand and issues the prophetic promise:

... because thou has done this thing and has not withheld thy son, thine only son:
That in blessing I will bless thee and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars

of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the sea shore and **thy seed** shall possess the **gate of his enemies**. And in thy **seed** shall all the nations [Gentiles] of the earth be blessed; because thou has obeyed my voice. (Genesis 22.17-18)

Another “gate” prophecy is Genesis 24 when Rebekah is chosen as a wife for Isaac. She goes willingly of her own heart laden with gifts from Isaac’s servant, a type of the Holy Spirit. Rebekah is sent away with a prophetic blessing:

Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions and let thy **seed** possess **the gate of those who hate them**. (60)

Notably, Jesus identifies that gate as a defensive gate that cannot withstand the opposition of God’s covenant children. We are to wage an offensive war against Satan and his cronies.

But it was only a couple of months ago when a light bulb turned on over my head. I watched a video called *Israel with Aline*. She was examining an archaeological dig at Caesarea Philippi where four dias were uncovered which were pagan altars to the goat god Pan. These altars were located above the cliff I previously described. Even trained goats had been known to dance there during the time of Christ. In Canaanite times, Baal was worshiped there. Eureka. A flash. Jesus will build his church upon **this rock that was an altar to false gods**. *It was in Caesarea Philippi* that Jesus openly declares war against all the false gods of the Gentile nations. It is his intention to rescue the people and the geography that had been profaned.

From his temptation in the wilderness to the cross, He demonstrates his power over cosmic powers and demons and commissions his disciples to do the same.

But why were the nations [Gentiles] the hot bed of false gods? All school children have heard of the mythologies of the Greeks, Romans, and Norsemen. The Greek works of Sophocles, Euripides and Homer show how the gods interacted with men with capriciousness, with evil intent, and even through intermarriage. Though seldom discussed, the Bible offers a similar explanation as to the origins of these mythologies in Genesis six, which will not be examined at this time. But pagan gods were real to these ancient people and that they worshiped them is not debated.

The Bible suggests that the nations (translation of the Hebrew pejorative Goyim) were pagan territories where God is not present, but Israel was set aside as a place where God would dwell and reveal His plans and purposes to his prophets. Israel was set aside by Yahweh.

In a sacred space, God is present. In a pagan place, a false god is present and that space and people need to be redeemed. God will ultimately display his superior power over these false gods and destroy them. The Battle over place begins in Genesis and is still going on until God makes a new heavens and a new earth.

God says, “remember the days of old, when the Most High divided the nations to their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, and set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel. For the LORD’s portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance . . . he instructed them and kept them as the apple of his eye. So the Lord did lead them and there was no strange god with him” (Deuteronomy 32.7-12).

So Israel is a geographical area promised to Abraham and given to his descendants through Jacob. The

geographical boundaries are gifted to Abram through a one-sided covenant which holds God to his promise in perpetuity: “Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen.15.18). Even modern Israel prefers the term Eretz Israel which means **the land**. Regardless of powers and overlords, the land itself is the promise and the name Holy Land has never been extinguished.

But the Gentile nations are another story. Just how did other supernatural beings dominate these regions? How did these nations lose their connection to the LORD? Did it happen after Noah or after Babel? In any event, their angelic principalities were lifted up in pride and, in an imitation of Satan, chose to corrupt these nations and extort worship. John MacArthur has an interesting note in his Legacy Study Bible.

When God was planning the salvation of His Chosen people, God ordained a plan where the number of nations, 70, corresponded to the number of the children of Israel, 70 according to Genesis 46.27. And that God alone carried Israel and would not allow it to fall. The MacArthur Study Bible. p. 249.

Likewise, we have the words of Jesus who told the Samaritan woman at the well, that “Salvation is of the Jews” (John 4). It was always His intention to begin with Israel and then spread His truth to the rest of the world.

With that purpose, Jesus sends out seventy. As with the twelve, Jesus gives the seventy authority. “Behold, I give you power to trample on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you” (Luke 10.19 KJV).

And, at the ascension, His disciples are commissioned to go into all nations (Gentiles). Paul, specifically is commissioned Apostle to the Gentiles. In his travels he would encounter their false gods. Likewise, from Paul comes the most definitive description of spiritual warfare. More on Paul later.

One of the most profound confrontations between good and evil is between the gods of Egypt and Moses. God sends Moses to bring the Hebrews [Jews] out of Egypt and back to their land, Canaan, which will become Israel. Moses is empowered by The Most High God. Plagues are sent to afflict Egypt. But, the Hebrews are not affected by these plagues. The children of Israel have an appointed sacred space, Goshen. So when the Lord sends flies into Egypt he says,

But on that day I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, where MY (emphasis mine) people live; no swarms of flies will be there, so you will know that I, the LORD am **in** this land. I will make a distinction between my people and your people” (Exodus 8.22) Again, “the only place it did not hail was the land of Goshen where the Israelites were. (Exodus 9.26 NIV)

Passover culminates the plan of God to deliver his people from evil. At passover, the LORD’s sacred presence turns a pagan space into a divine one. To prepare for the passover, God instructs the Hebrews to apply the blood of a perfect lamb on the door posts and lintels. This lamb is a type of the saving blood of Jesus.

On that same night, I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals-- and I will bring judgment on **all the gods of Egypt**. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood,

I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.
(Exodus 12.12 NIV)

So many misread this passage as a death angel passing over. No. God will pass over. He will encompass that pagan place under the shadow of His wings. The entire geography becomes His. When God passes over a place, no matter how pagan, their gods cannot prevail.

Another case in point is the encroachment of the Assyrians into Judah during the time of Isaiah. They have captured many towns and are closing in on Jerusalem. Both in Isaiah's near future and in the distant future, Jerusalem will be God's headquarters for bringing judgment on foreign nations. Regarding the army of the Assyrians, God tells Isaiah,

The Lord is the Mighty of One of Israel. And the Lord shall cause his glorious voice to be heard For through the voice of the LORD shall the Assyrian be beaten down, which smote with a rod. (Isaiah 30.29-31) "As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem; defending also he will deliver it; **and passing over, he will preserve it**" (Isaiah 31.5 KJV)

And we know the end of the story as told in Isaiah 37 and 2 Kings 19.35. God sends an angel who kills 185,000 Assyrians who are trying to capture Jerusalem. Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, finally retreats to Nineveh and is eventually killed by one of his children. Some scholars refer to the Antichrist as "The Assyrian." So, this prophecy does double duty.

During the Exodus, the children of Israel come to the bitter pool of Marah. The people are thirsty but the water is poisonous. Lots of metaphoric interpretations possible in the text. Moses throws in a wooden stick, *etz* in Hebrew. The *etz* is a type of the cross, also made of wood, making the water sweet. The old wooden cross takes the poison out of death for us, making it sweet.

Let's take a look at the cure of Naaman the leper. He gives the dirt of Israel a whole new significance. The sacred space of his cure is so powerful he must obtain shovelsful of it, *Erez* Israel. Naaman is from Syria. He worships a false god called Rimmon. When he become ill, his Jewish servant girl urges him to go to the prophet Elisha. Elisha tells him that he must wash in the river Jordan seven times. Scornful, eventually Naaman does, and his flesh becomes clean and he declares, "Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel" now therefore I pray take a blessing of thy servant." Of course, Elisha refuses any pay, but when Naaman asks to be able to take the dirt of Israel on two mules, Elisha grants it. Naaman wants holy ground under his feet when he bows down to Yahweh in the house of Rimmon. (2 Kings 5).

I'm sure many examples may spring to mind. A powerful story is that of Daniel and his captivity in Babylon. We know that Babylon epitomizes false religions. The Babylonian religion will make a return at the end of the age. Daniel is taken captive to Babylon but he represents Yahweh's entrance into this pagan place. Empowered, he escapes from the jaws of lions and receives visions of the end of days. A close reading of Daniel chapter ten tells of a battle between God's angels and pagan principalities.

In answer to Daniel's prayer, a divine being comes, probably the pre-incarnate Christ. Then, an angel explains to Daniel what will come to pass at the end of the Age. And, exactly what will happen to Israel. He is told of the Messiah, the death of the Messiah, and of the counterfeit, *The Coming Prince*, the Antichrist. Daniel learns that this information could only be delivered after a battle between the

good angels and the princes of Persia and Greece. Pagan gods of Pagan places.

Flash forward to the New Testament to the Apostle Paul who receives his commission while traveling to the epicenter of pagan Gentile nations, Damascus. Today Damascus is the center of the regional powers of Islam and is a constant threat to Israel. The Bible prophesies its annihilation. Its destruction will no doubt herald the end of our present day. (Isaiah 17).

While on his mission journeys Paul encounters many powers of darkness. Likewise, he introduces weapons of warfare that are designed to counter their attacks. One weapon is countermanding that of the enemy with the spoken word. We may recall Jesus using Scripture against Satan in the wilderness. After Antioch, Paul travels to Pathos where he meets Bar Jesus, a Jewish sorcerer. Paul does not pray in this instance, but commands, not only with words, but with a curse. (Acts 13)

You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! Will you never stop perverting the ways of the Lord? The hand of the Lord is against you, You are going to be blind, and for a time you will not be able to see the light of the sun.”

Peter, similarly, rebukes Simon the Sorcerer. The resurrected Jesus declares that signs shall follow all those who believe (Mark 16. 17-18). Just as the twelve and the seventy, we have been given authority under the power of the Holy Spirit’s guidance. We, too, must now be an enemy of the Gentile gods, to whom, we once were enslaved. For we have been translated out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the son of His love. Ephesians 2.2)

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians instructs us in spiritual warfare. I have seen a lot of questionable applications of Ephesians 12 which is sometimes understood as a pantomime of putting on clothing instead of the description of a powerful reality. For example, if we don’t know and understand the Bible, we have no “belt of truth.”

Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Ephesians 12.11-12 KJV) Notice the implication of places.

We, as empowered by God, can intrude those places and bring His sacred presence and change any atmosphere and flip any script. But we must be taught about our superior power and authority.

I want to close with a couple of instances of the intrusion of God upon a place, and its reverse, the intrusion of Satan into a place.

The Cricket Miracle

It was about 1974 and I and my four boys were living in a run down farm house near Georgetown Minnesota. It was late summer and there was an invasion of crickets. My sanity was challenged. I killed around a hundred a day as they invaded every place and nook and cranny of that house. I had to sit up in bed as they would fall from the ceiling into my hair. I hate bugs and the very squish of killing a cricket can make me gag. I was a pagan, I had no interest in God. I thought Jesus was probably a guru like Buddha or some Indian sage. I was ignorant. But I had a praying Mother. I believed in prayer.

I called her and asked her to pray for me. I don't recall if she prayed over the phone or independently. All I know is that after the call, I only had to kill seven more crickets.

That night I went outside and heard their chirps from yards away forming a square around the house. No cricket was in the yard but there was an invisible wall, a Maginot line, that they could not cross. This Maginot line stayed in place. NO more crickets. Two days later was a hard freeze, and they were gone even from their cricket border. Did I have enough sense to thank the Lord. No, I knew it was a miracle. But it would take another seven years until I was saved.

The Paul N Story and the Gods of Pan

I began this paper with the Gods of Pan and now in a complete circle will end with Paul's story that makes a lot of sense in the light of the "gates of hell". I had Paul in an English 101 class that I was teaching. He enjoyed coming into the office to chat. The subject, his homosexuality, his boyfriends, who said what, and who was being "bitchy." I had only been saved a couple of years but lost no chance to tell Paul that homosexuality was wrong and that he should convert, and ask Jesus to save him and to leave homosexuality forever.

I lived in a big old farmhouse in a small town about seventeen miles from the college. One night about 3am, my front door bursts open in and in comes Paul screaming and running into my bedroom. In one leap, he is on top of my bed, screaming and crying and holding on to me. At that moment we were both screaming. His story emerged between sobs. It was Friday night and he said he was in his dorm room studying at his desk with his back to the door which was slightly ajar.

At first a smell accosted him, but when he looked around, he saw the figure of a goat with a man's head and curved horns and enormous sexual organs. He knew the goat's intent was to have sex with him. He charged past the goat and down the hall to find someone to drive him to my house. Having no idea where I lived, he somehow (supernaturally?) found my house and burst in (I guess before the days of locked doors).

I recognized the creature that he described from mythology known to the Romans as a Satyr or Satyrion or to the Greeks as the goat god. I explained to him the connection between the Satyr and perverted sex. Eventually, he calmed down enough to find a place to sleep upstairs. All my sons were asleep up there. He assured me it would be okay as they were no his "type."

The next day I called the preacher and explained to him what happened. He kindly came over but really didn't know what to do and I certainly did not. Paul was too afraid to leave my house until the following Monday when he let me drive him to school. Later, I understood that deliverance against this fallen demon was in order.

But it was only recently that I saw the relationship between the gates of hell in Caesarea Philippi and the gods of Pan connection to the Paul N incident. It is good to know that Jesus has declared out and out warfare on places of idolatry. Full circle, I knew I had the tools of attack but didn't know how to use them. Even taken into the ministry of deliverance, I am still trying to learn the implications of our effectiveness against darkness. But instinctively Paul knew that I represented a place where God would pass over and where the demonic entity he encountered could not enter.

Mary Pinkney Gulbranson Parnell Share material with attribution. Mistakes may embarrass me, as it written while sick September 9-20, 2025

