

Matthew 16:1-20

Overview

As we work our way through the center section of the gospel, describing the Lord’s proclamation, Matthew is alternating between the overwhelming evidence for our Lord as the Messiah in his miracles, and the persistent rejection he faces at the hands of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees (Figure 1, chart). This chapter contains the second of the two episodes of Pharisaic rejection, and Peter’s confession, in which the announcement of the true king completes the inclusio initiated with Herod’s false kingship at the start of ch. 14.

16:21 actually introduces the third major section of the gospel, an example of how the chapter divisions in our Bible, added in the 13th century long after the books were written, often do not correspond with the internal structure of the text.

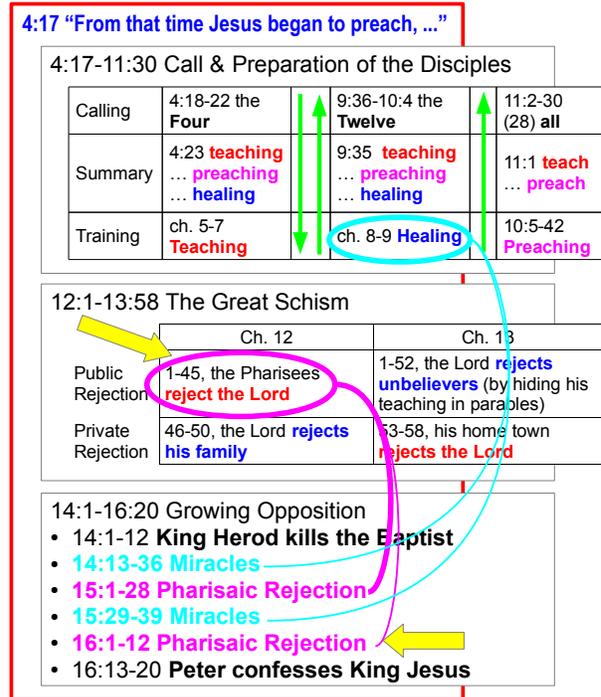


Figure 1: Context of ch. 16:1-20

1-11, Rejection by the Religious Establishment

As in ch. 15, the section is organized by changes in the people to whom the Lord is speaking: first the Pharisees (vv. 1-4), then the disciples (5-12) (Table 1, chart). There is no section here for the multitude, who become much less common from this point on.

1-4, Request for a Sign

1 The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came,--This is Matthew’s second reference to the Sadducees, after their appearance at John’s baptism

	Ch. 15	Ch. 16
Challenge from the Pharisees	vv. 1-9 Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, 2 Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread. ...	vv. 1-4 The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came, and tempting desired him that he would shew them a sign from heaven. ...
Instruction to the multitude	vv. 10-11 And he called the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand: 11 Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.	
Instruction to the disciples	vv. 12-20 Then came his disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying? ...	vv. 5-12 And when his disciples were come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. ...

Table 1: Confrontations with the Establishment

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in 3:7. Matthew mentions them seven times (four in this chapter), reflecting his knowledge of Jewish culture and his appeal to a Jewish-Christian readership. Mark and Luke mention them only once each (in parallels to Matt 22:23), and they appear five times in Acts.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees contrast in their place in society, their beliefs, and their attitude toward the believers (chart).

Socially, the Sadducees were high society, while the Pharisees were more of the common people. They held the high priesthood, and thus controlled the institutions of the temple:

Act 5:17 Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation,

This affiliation with the temple explains the enthusiasm of Nicodemus, the Pharisee, for the Lord's cleansing of the temple in John 3. By opposing the temple ordinances, the Lord gives the Pharisees reason to think that he is opposed to the Sadducees, and the Pharisees hope to recruit this charismatic, miracle-working teacher to their party.

Herod the Great married Mariamne, the daughter of the High Priest, so the Sadducees were sympathetic with the royal family.¹

Doctrinally, the Sadducees tended to be rationalists, denying supernatural things:

Mat 22:23 The same day came to him the Sadducees, which say that there is no resurrection,

Act 23:8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.

Spiritually, while both parties opposed the Lord, the Sadducees were more intense and persistent. Some Pharisees were sympathetic (Gamaliel in Acts 5), and some believed: Nicodemus (John 19:39), Saul of Tarsus, Acts 15:5. No Sadducees are said to believe. 36% of the references to the Sadducees are in Acts, all in opposition to the early church. Only 9% of the NT references to Pharisees are in Acts, and all of them describe either Paul or those sympathetic to him.

So the appearance of the Sadducees in ch. 16 marks an escalation in the opposition to the Lord. The request for a sign in 12:38 came from scribes and Pharisees, and we have noted already that Matthew recognizes some virtue in the scribes. But now the Sadducees join in the questioning, in spite of their natural antipathy for the Pharisees.

and tempting—The last time we saw this word was in 4:1, 3, where it described what Satan did in the desert. There, as here, the Lord was challenged to produce a miracle in order to authenticate himself. By repeating this verb from Satan's temptation, Matthew is aligning the Jewish elite with Satan. There might have been some ambiguity in the request for a sign in ch. 12. Here, it is directly antagonistic.

desired him that he would shew them a sign from heaven.--In 12:38, the scribes and Pharisees

¹ In Mark's parallel (8:15) with Matt 16:6, the Lord speaks of "Herod" instead of "the Sadducees."

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asked for “a sign from thee.” Here, the Pharisees and Sadducees seek “a sign from heaven,” challenging his claim to be sent by the Father.

As with Satan in the wilderness, the Lord refuses to put on a show. He does not perform for amusement or to glorify himself, but only for the benefit of those in need.²

2 He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, *It will be fair weather: for the sky is red.* 3 And in the morning, *It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowring.*--They ask for a sign from heaven, so he directs their attention to the heavens. They do not need his intervention for God to show a sign. He does it every day, marking the sky to indicate what is about to happen the next day. For the attentive observer, the signs are all around. And the Lord claims that this group of questioners is aware of these signs: “ye say.”

O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not *discern* the signs of the times?--The world is just as full of evidence for the Lord’s Messiahship as it is of evidence for the next day’s weather. Not only have they seen his abundant miracles, but they should know that they are at the end of Daniel’s sixty-nine sabbatical years, and that the world empires anticipated by the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel have run their course. He calls them “hypocrites” because they will recognize the signs God gives about the weather, but not those that he gives concerning his Son.

In referring to the signs of “the times,” the Lord may be alluding to an episode in the life of David. After the death of Saul (2 Sam 1), the northern kingdom persisted for a while under his son Ishbosheth, until he was assassinated in 2 Sam 4. After that, we read (chart),

2Sa 5:3 So all the elders of Israel came to the king to Hebron; and king David made a league with them in Hebron before the LORD: and they anointed David king over Israel.

The Chronicler (1 Chr 12:23-38) gives more detail, counting the people who came from each of the tribes to anoint David (Table 2).³ As we compare these numbers with the second census in Numbers 26, we notice some interesting things.

1. Judah, Simeon, Levi, and Benjamin send few people. Judah, and Simeon in its midst, are already following David, and so send a small representation. Levi may represent only those from outside Judah. Benjamin is small because (1 Ch 12:29) it was Saul’s tribe, and most of them were hoping for a restoration of Saul’s family.
2. Most of the other tribes appear with numbers of the same order of magnitude as when they entered the land.
3. Issachar is the exception. It was a large tribe at the time of the conquest, and lived in the most fertile part of the land, where it should have prospered, but only 200 representatives come to crown David. But the Chronicler explains:

2 Morris on 12:38: “His miracles were always directed toward the fulfilling of a need felt by those for whom the miracle was performed”

3 The first, third, and fourth columns are from K&D, with two errors corrected.

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1Ch 12:32 And of the children of Issachar, *which were men* that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do; 32 the heads of them *were* two hundred; and all their brethren *were* at their commandment.

The small representation they sent “had understanding of the times.” They recognized that Saul’s rule was at an end; that David was God’s appointed successor; and that they ought to follow him. As a result, “all their brethren” followed their recommendation, and endorsed David’s rule.

Contrast these events with our Lord’s experience.

- The subject of the context in 1 Chr 12 is the nation’s support of David as king, after the defeat of Saul. This is the decision that faces the nation concerning our Lord.

	Num 26	1 Chr 12	
Of the tribe of: Judah	76,500	6,800 men	
Of the tribe of: Simeon	22,200	7,100 men	
Of the tribe of: Levi	23,000	4,600 men	
With Jehoiada the prince of Aaron		3,700 men	
With Zadok and his father’s house			22 שָׂרִים (captains)
Of the tribe of: Benjamin	45,600	3,000 men	
Of the tribe of: Ephraim	32,500	20,800 men	
Of the half-tribe of: Manasseh	52,700 (whole tribe)	18,000 men	
Of the tribe of: Issachar	64,300		200 ראשים (heads)
Of the tribe of: Zebulun	60,500	50,000 men	
Of the tribe of: Naphtali	45,400	37,000 men	1000 שָׂרִים
Of the tribe of: Dan	64,400	28,600 men	
Of the tribe of: Asher	53,400	40,000 men	
Of two and a half trans-Jordanic tribes	Reuben: 43,730 Gad: 40,500	120,000 men	
Total	601,730	339,600 men	1222 heads & captains

Table 2: The census of those who anointed David

- The other tribes send thousands of supporters. Issachar sends only 200, but they persuade their peers. So the Pharisees and Sadducees influence the multitudes.
- Issachar’s elite has “understanding of the times.” They perceive what is going on and what response is appropriate. So the Jewish elite at our Lord’s time should recognize what is happening, but they persist in rejecting the clear credentials that he gives.

4 A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas.--He already spelled out this sign in 12:39-40 (chart),

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Mat 12:39 But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: 40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

And he left them, and departed.--As we have seen before, and in keeping with his instruction to the disciples in 10:14, the Lord does not linger with those who reject his preaching, but withdraws (chart):

Mat 10:14 And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet.

Mat 12:14 Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him. 15 But when Jesus knew *it*, he withdrew himself from thence:

Mat 15:21 Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.

5-12, The Lord instructs the disciples

5 And when his disciples were come to the other side,--Mark 8:13-14 makes it clear that the Lord is traveling with them in the boat, but the focus is on them to emphasize the shift in scene.

He is on his way to Caesarea Philippi (v. 13), by way of Bethsaida (Mark 8:22). (Don't confuse with Caesarea, on the coast.) So they are sailing north-eastward from Magdala (Figure 2, chart).

they had forgotten to take bread.--Bethsaida is where he fed the 5000 in ch. 14. By our reconstruction, that feeding was done with their lunch, but this time they have not taken any food, and anticipating another crowd, they are concerned.

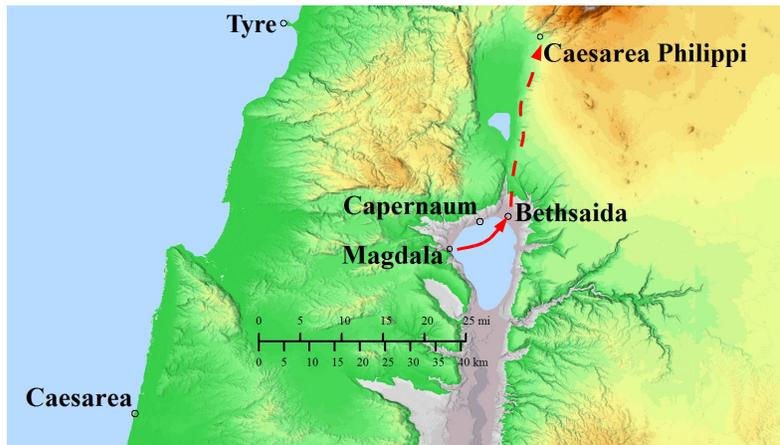


Figure 2: From Magdala to Caesarea Philippi

6 Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.--As in ch. 15, he wants to explain to the disciples the interaction he has just had with the religious establishment.

7 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have taken no bread.--They think that he is warning them against bread purchased from the Pharisees and Sadducees, or in some way contaminated by their influence. Perhaps they think that after the increasingly hostile

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conduct of the Jewish leaders, the Lord is exhorting them (the disciples) on the basis of OT teachings such as (chart)

Pro 23:6 Eat thou not the bread of *him that hath* an evil eye, neither desire thou his dainty meats:

8 Which when Jesus perceived, he said unto them,--Their comment betrays two errors: a lack of faith for physical provision, and a lack of discernment about the threat posed by the Pharisees' supposedly minor request.

O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have brought no bread? 9 Do ye not yet understand, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? 10 Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up?--Their first error is to be worrying about material things. He has just given them two vivid demonstrations of his ability to feed them. They should not be concerned about such things. This has been his teaching all along:

Mat 6:31 Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? 32 (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. 33 But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

11 How is it that ye do not understand that I spake *it* not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? 12 Then understood they how that he bade *them* not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.--He is not talking about physical bread, but about the influence of teaching. Compare the imagery with his earlier parable:

Mat 13:33 Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.

Something very small that can influence the larger mass. Their request for a sign appears innocuous, but is actually insidious. One might think the Lord is too abrupt in rebuking them, but he is dealing with a threat that, though apparently small, could derail him (just as Satan's temptation had). If he becomes a circus side-show, his cause is lost.

13-20, Closing Bracket

This section corresponds to the opening about Herod at the start of ch. 14 (Figure 1, chart). The two sections contrast two kings: Herod, an unworthy and wicked man, and the Lord Jesus, here declared to bear the title by which the OT designates the promised king of Israel.⁴

First we review the section itself, then discuss the broader questions that it raises concerning

4 I have drawn extensively in this section on the excellent study by Jack Kingsbury, JBL 98:1 (1979), 67-83.

Peter's role in the church.

Exposition of the Text

13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi--As we noted (Figure 2, chart), this is at the northern extremity of the land, nestled under the slopes of Mt Hermon, and not to be confused with Caesarea by the sea. It has two characteristics that may be important for the story.

1. It is remote from the rest of the land, approximately the same latitude as Tyre and Sidon. The focus of this episode is leading the disciples to a fuller understanding of his person. But according to v. 20, he does not want them proclaiming this truth openly. Closer to the main population centers, he would be swarmed by multitudes. Previously, he tried to withdraw to Bethsaida for a time alone with them, but the crowds followed. Now he goes farther afield, to ensure their privacy.
2. Though the city lay within the territory of Herod Philip (from whom it takes its distinctive name), the population was mostly pagan. There are two evidences of this.
 - (a) The city was given to Herod's father, Herod the Great, by Caesar Augustus, and Herod proceeded to erect there a temple to Caesar,⁵ hardly something that would have been tolerated in a mostly Jewish area.
 - (b) There was precedent for pagan worship in this area. One of the sources of the Jordan flows from a cave there, where there was a shrine to the Greek god Pan, and before the city was renamed in honor of Caesar and Philip, it was known as "Panion" or "Panium" (Josephus), in honor of this deity. To this day, its Arab name is Baniyas, a corruption of the name Pan. So, as in 15:21 and probably 12:14, in withdrawing from the opposition of the Jews, the Lord goes to Gentile territory. There may be an anticipation here of his ultimate ministry, not to Jews only, but also to Gentiles (although we have no record that he encountered anyone other than the disciples on this trip).

he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?--He delights to claim the title "son of man," identifying himself with his flock, and anticipating the dominion that he is to receive, according to Daniel 7. But in leading his disciples to understand more of his person and work, he encourages them to contrast what they have learned with the opinion of the general population.

The disciples' response echoes John's responses to the Jews in John 1 (Table 3, chart). Note that the opinions that the disciples report from the people do not include the first possibility contemplated by John, the Christ. Peter will shortly remedy this defect.

14 And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist:--This opinion recalls the story about Herod with which this section began:

⁵ Josephus, Ant 3.363-364; Wars 1.404-406

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Mat 14:1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus, 2 And said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him.

some, Elias;--This was the first option considered by the Jews who questioned John. The reason for this question is the promise in Malachi,

Mal 4:5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD:

John 1:19	Matt 16:14-16
Joh 1:19 And this is the record of John , when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?	And they said, Some <i>say that thou art John the Baptist</i> :
20 And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ .	
21 And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias ? And he saith, I am not.	some, Elias ;
Art thou that prophet ? And he answered, No.	and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets .

Table 3: Comparing John and Jesus

Remember that “Elias” in the NT is Elijah; the OT Elisha becomes “Eliseus” in Greek. Recall that the relation between Elijah and his disciple Elisha anticipates the relation between John and our Lord, and that Elisha, “God is salvation,” anticipates the name “Jesus,” “Jehovah is salvation.” Though John disavowed identity with Elijah, our Lord makes that identification,

Mat 11:14 And if ye will receive *it*, this is Elias, which was for to come.

and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.--This suggestion corresponds to “that prophet” in John 1. The reference there is to Moses’ Messianic promise,

Deu 18:15 The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken;

The introduction of Jeremiah is interesting. At least three facets of Jeremiah’s ministry anticipate the Lord’s (chart).

Both of them warn of God’s judgment on the temple. Early in the book of Jeremiah, we read a sermon that he preached against the temple:⁶

Jer 7:1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, 2 Stand in the gate of the LORD’S house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all *ye of Judah*, that enter in at these gates to worship the LORD. 3 Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. 4 Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The

⁶ A very similar sermon is presented in ch. 26, dated to the beginning of Jehoiakim’s reign, and they may be the same. However, that sermon met severe resistance from the priests, a response that is not recorded here. Alternatively, ch. 7 may record a message at the start of his ministry. His ministry began in the 13th year of Josiah’s reign (1:3), while the discovery of the book of the law that led to Josiah’s reform was not until his 18th year (2 Kings 22:3-8). Thus this first sermon may have been part of the Lord’s work to prepare for the restoration of the temple under Josiah, a remarkably different response by the priests than the second edition under Jehoiakim some 14 years later.

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temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, *are* these. ... 11 Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen *it*, saith the LORD. 12 But go ye now unto my place which *was* in Shiloh, where I set my name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. 13 And now, because ye have done all these works, saith the LORD, and I spake unto you, rising up early and speaking, but ye heard not; and I called you, but ye answered not; 14 Therefore will I do unto *this* house, which is called by my name, wherein ye trust, and unto the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh.

A very similar sermon is recorded in ch. 26, and dated to the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim.

In Matthew, the Lord's main sermon against the temple is yet to come, in the cleansing of the temple (21:12-13) and the Olivet Discourse (ch. 24), but he has already claimed to be greater than the temple (12:6), and has warned of coming judgment on the Galilean towns where his miracles were done (11:20-24).

The Jewish establishment led the opposition against both of them. Because of his warnings about the fall of the temple, and particularly the second edition in ch. 26, Jeremiah incurred the wrath of the temple hierarchy:

Jer 26:8 Now it came to pass, when Jeremiah had made an end of speaking all that the LORD had commanded *him* to speak unto all the people, that **the priests and the prophets** and all the people took him, saying, Thou shalt surely die. 9 Why hast thou prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate without an inhabitant? And all the people were gathered against Jeremiah in the house of the LORD. 10 When the princes of Judah heard these things, then they came up from the king's house unto the house of the LORD, and sat down in the entry of the new gate of the LORD'S *house*. 11 Then spake **the priests and the prophets** unto the princes and to all the people, saying, This man *is* worthy to die; for he hath prophesied against this city, as ye have heard with your ears.

Similarly, the main opposition against our Lord comes from the religious elite. Though the palace initially protected Jeremiah (Jer 26:16), they eventually turned against him, during the reign of Zedekiah, when he foretold Nebuchadnezzar's victory and urged the city to surrender (38:1-4).

He suffered greatly for his faithful prophetic ministry. Like our Lord, Jeremiah was rejected by those among whom he grew up. He was raised in Anathoth (1:1), but early in the book, we read:

Jer 11:21 the men of Anathoth, that seek thy life, saying, Prophecy not in the name of the LORD, that thou die not by our hand:

Similarly, our Lord was rejected when he preached "in his own country" (13:54-58).

Later, because of the opposition of the princes, Jeremiah was imprisoned, and ultimately cast into a dungeon to starve to death:

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Jer 38:6 Then took they Jeremiah, and cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah the son of Hammelech, that *was* in the court of the prison: and they let down Jeremiah with cords. And in the dungeon *there was* no water, but mire: so Jeremiah sunk in the mire.

Ebedmelech, an Ethiopian eunuch, appealed on his behalf to the king, who had him removed from the dungeon, but he continued to be imprisoned until the fall of Jerusalem. Similarly, our Lord suffered at the hands of the higher classes.

15 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? 16 And Simon Peter answered and said,--This is one of only three verses in Matt that combine “Simon” and “Peter”; the others are 4:18 and 10:2 (chart):

Mat 4:18-19 And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, **Simon called Peter**, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. 19 And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

Mat 10:2 Now the names of the twelve apostles are these; The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James *the son* of Zebedee, and John his brother;

Both of these emphasize the Peter is the first one to be called. We have already seen that he stands out among the Twelve. He is the one who jumps out of the boat to join the Lord. He is the one who speaks up with questions and ideas (sometimes good, sometimes bad). Here again, he is the one who steps to the fore with an answer to the Lord’s question.

Thou art the Christ,--That is, the Messiah, which in Hebrew means the anointed one. Three characters in the OT were anointed: the king, the prophet, and the priest. The title recalls the Lord’s role as the fulfillment of all three.

John denied three roles in John 1: the Christ, Elijah, and the promised prophet. The disciples report that people identify Jesus with Elijah, or one of the prophets or with John himself, but they don’t mention the identity with the Christ. This is the link that Peter perceives.

“Christ” is the title under which people were looking for the promised deliverer. Matthew, as the omniscient narrator, uses it four times in ch. 1 (vv. 1, 16, 17, 18) to identify the Lord (chart). Since then, it has appeared only twice, both times generically, rather than specifically referring to the Lord Jesus (chart):

Mat 2:4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

Mat 11:2 Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, 3 And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?

Peter’s confession now asserts what Matthew as narrator has anticipated in ch. 1, that Jesus is indeed “he that should come.”

the Son of the living God.--This is the fifth time that the Lord has been called by this name. The first three were by Satan at the temptation, and by the demons plaguing the Gerasenes. The disciples as a whole confessed him as the Son of God when he came to them after the feeding of

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the 5000 in ch. 14,

Mat 14:33 Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.

and now Peter confirms it emphatically.

The most important feature of the title “Son of God” is that it is the title God promises to David’s son in 2 Sam 7.

2Sa 7:12-16 And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. 14 **I will be his father, and he shall be my son.**

The Psalms repeat the title to describe the promised king:

Psa 2:7 I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, **Thou art my Son**; this day have I begotten thee.

Psa 89:26 He shall cry unto me, Thou *art* my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation. 27 Also **I will make him my firstborn**, higher than the kings of the earth.

Herod, with whom this section opened, was king by virtue of political maneuvering. His father had attempted to kill the infant Messiah, and he himself put to death the forerunner who announced his coming. Now, at the close of the section, Peter declares the true king.

We have seen all three titles of our Lord—Son of Man, Christ, and Son of God—here within the span of three verses. All three recur throughout the gospel (Son of Man 32x, Christ 17x, Son of God 9x), but there is only one other chapter in Matthew where the three come together, and that is when our Lord is on trial before the Jews, after his arrest (chart).

Mat 26:63 And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the **Christ**, the **Son of God**. 64 Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the **Son of man** sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.

What the disciples recognize at the far limits of the land of Israel, in a place dominated by gentiles, the Jews in the chambers of God’s temple in Jerusalem continue to challenge.

17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona:--The word “Barjona” is Aramaic for “son of Jona.” This title is used four times in the fourth gospel of John,⁷ once when the Lord calls him (1:42), and three times in the final interview by the sea of Galilee (21:15, 16, 17), but this is its only use in the synoptics. The point is not the specific name, but a contrast between Peter’s nature as a human with a human father, and the point he has just declared, that the father of Jesus is God.⁸ The reason for the blessing, which follows, rests on

7 In the MT. A few older mss, and modern critics, prefer the reading “son of John,” assuming that the text has been assimilated to Matt 16:17.

8 Thus Chrysostom, AD 400, in his homily on 15:21-22, “What then saith Christ? ‘Thou art Simon, the son of

this contrast:

for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.--

Having emphasized the difference in their paternity, the Lord points out the bridge between them: Peter’s insight comes not from his natural father, but from the Father of the Lord Jesus.

18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter,--Peter applies to the Lord a title that the people have been reluctant to give him. In return, the Lord gives him the name by which he is most commonly known. His parents called him “Simon”; “Peter” is the title given him by the Lord. In fact, John 1 records that the Lord gave him this title when he first met him:

Joh 1:42 And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone.

And it is as Peter that he is referenced throughout the gospel. But the title was apparently given in light of this event, which the Lord was anticipating.

and upon this rock I will build my church;--

The name that the Lord gives Peter, *πετρος*, means “stone.” The word “rock” is very similar, *πετρα*. Table 4 compares them (chart).

and the gates of hell shall not prevail

against it.--“Gates of hell” (better, “gates of

Hades,” the place of the dead) is a metaphor for the power of death. The expression appears once in the canonical OT to refer to the grave (which is how the AV translates it) (chart):⁹

Isa 38:10 I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the **gates of the grave**: I am deprived of the residue of my years.

The “gates of Hades” are not built to keep the enemy out, but to keep dead people in. The adversaries of the church have always tried to defeat it through death, a circumstance that the Lord elaborates at the very beginning of the next section, where he predicts his coming death.

Mat 16:21 From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and **be killed**, and be **raised again** the third day.

	Peter <i>πετρος</i>	Rock <i>πετρα</i>
Gender	Masculine	Feminine
Usage as “rock”	Something to throw 2 Macc 1:16; 4:41; Wis 17:17 Can have holes or caves Oba 1:3; Isa 2:19	Water from the rock Ex 17:6; 1 Cor 10:4 Where Moses stood to see the Lord Ex 33:21 Where the wise man build his house Matt 7:24, 25
Distribution	13x LXX, 103x NT (all of Peter) All LXX instances are plural	101x LXX, 15x NT Only 10x plural in LXX

Table 4: Peter and the Rock

Jonas; thou shalt be called Cephas.’ ‘Thus since thou hast proclaimed my Father, I too name him that begat thee;’ all but saying, ‘As thou art son of Jonas, even so am I of my Father.’”

9 It also appears in the Apocrypha at Wis 16:13 and Pss 16:2. A related expression is “gates of death,” e.g., Psa 9:13; 107:18.

Matthew 16:1-20

He has already warned them to expect such treatment:

Mat 10:21 And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against *their* parents, and **cause them to be put to death.**
22 And ye shall be hated of all *men* for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be **saved.**

But death will not prevail against him, nor against the church that he is building.

19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven:--The image is of the master of the house entrusting the keys to a servant. One thinks of the example of Eliakim in Isaiah 22, whom the Lord chooses to replace the corrupt steward Shebna (chart):

Isa 22:15 Thus saith the Lord GOD of hosts, Go, get thee unto this treasurer, *even* unto Shebna, which *is* over the house, *and say*, ... 19 ... I will drive thee from thy station, and from thy state shall he pull thee down. 20 And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah: 21 And I will clothe him with thy robe, and strengthen him with thy girdle, and I will commit thy government into his hand: and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. 22 And **the key of the house of David** will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.

Recall the image of the householder and his treasure in the last parable:

Mat 13:52 Then said he unto them, Therefore every scribe *which is* instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man *that is* an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure *things* new and old.

The godly scribe is like a faithful steward who provides from the treasures of the household what the people need. Elsewhere, in the only other use of “key” in the gospels, the Jewish lawyers were abusing their stewardship of God’s truth:

Luk 11:52 Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the **key of knowledge**: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.

Peter is the first to articulate that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Christ. He is a faithful steward of God’s truth.

and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.--Two things in this verse deserve comment: the semantics of binding and loosing, and the tense of the verbs.

Semantically, “binding” and “loosing” were common idioms among the Jews to describe specifying conduct that was or was not acceptable.¹⁰ We can show the point within the Bible itself, and in fact, within Matthew. To loose is to permit conduct, to tell what is permitted (chart):

Mat 5:19 Whosoever therefore shall **break [loose]** one of these least commandments,

¹⁰ See Gill for references.

Matthew 16:1-20

and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven:

Conversely, to bind is to restrict conduct, to define what is forbidden:

Mat 23:3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that* observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. 4 For they **bind**¹¹ heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers.

So the focus is on explaining to God's people what is and is not permitted. Think of Peter, in Acts 10, receiving the vision declaring all meats clean and by extension allowing fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

There is a striking parallel to this verse later in Matthew:

Mat 18:18 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever **ye** shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever **ye** shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

The context is church discipline, and the authority of the church as a whole to discipline people based on their conduct. Again, the meaning of declaring what is permitted or what is not fits very well. In ch. 18, this power is extended to all the apostles, and much of the NT, which they wrote, spells out how believers are to live in the light of the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

Now we turn to the unusual *tense* of the Greek verbs. They are not simple futures, but future perfects, "shall have been." The simple future would suggest that Peter (and in ch. 18, the other disciples) have the power to make something permitted or forbidden. But the future perfect shows that they are binding things that have already been bound in heaven, and loosing things that heaven has already loosed. Their authority is not to create new rules, but (like stewards) to grant access to the contents of the heavenly storehouse.

20 Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.--

We suggested that the Lord's purpose in moving to this remote area was to be alone with the disciples. Why does he not want them to publicize the insight that Peter has articulated?

The likely reason is seen in the next paragraph, where Peter is still utterly confused about the Messiah's mission. Had they proclaimed him as Messiah at this point, they would only stir up nationalistic fervor. They need to learn first-hand the message of the last third of the book, that the Messiah must die, then rise again, for his people. Messiah is not just prophet and king, but also priest, and until the resurrection they do not understand that aspect of his work.

Peter and the Church¹²

We have been deferring the question with which most people approach this passage: is Peter the rock? Especially since the reformation, Catholics have cited this chapter to show that Peter is the first pope, the vicar of Christ on earth. Protestants in turn insist that the rock is not Peter, but the

11 In this case, the Greek verb differs; it is δεσμευω, not δεω. But semantically, it expresses a closely related idea.

12 I draw heavily in this section on Kingsbury, *JBL* 98:1 (1979), 67-83.

Matthew 16:1-20

Lord Jesus, or at least Peter's confession about the Lord.¹³

We can find useful insight on this matter from three perspectives: Peter's preeminence among the disciples, the degree to which he is an example of all of them, and finally the use of architectural language throughout the NT to describe the church.

Peter as the First among the Disciples

Peter is clearly prominent among the Twelve.¹⁴ We saw in our study of 15:15 that before the list of the twelve in 10:2-4, only Matthew and the four fishermen are named, once each. After that, Judas appears 4x, James and John only once, but Peter 23 times. So we ought not to be shy about recognizing Peter as a natural leader of the disciples. We see this in Acts as well. In ch. 1, he is the one who suggests the need to choose a successor to Judas. In ch. 2, he preaches the first sermon to the Jews, and in ch. 10, he inaugurates the mission to the Gentiles. By God's grace, Peter occupies an important position in the early church.

Peter as One of the Disciples

Peter may be the first of the Twelve to get the message, but he is not over them.¹⁵ Almost everything that is said of Peter, is also said of the others (Table 5, chart). He is called; so are they. He has little faith; so do they. He and they both ask for explanations of parables, declare Christ to be the Son of God, are declared by the Lord to be blessed with special revelation, receive power to bind and loose, and are offended at his death. He is one of the Twelve, and shares with them the very definite privileges and responsibilities of being the apostles of the Messiah.

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- 13 Chrysostom (AD 400), writing before the reformation had drawn the battle lines, actually adopts this position in his homily on Matt 15:21-22: "therefore He added this, 'And I say unto thee, Thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build my Church;' that is, on the faith of his confession."
- 14 Recall the discussion above on the dual title "Simon Peter," which in its other two occurrences in Matthew marks his primacy.
- 15 Thus Origen (AD 200), on Matthew (Book xii, section 11): "But if you suppose that upon that one Peter only the whole church is built by God, what would you say about John the son of thunder or each one of the Apostles? Shall we otherwise dare to say, that against Peter in particular the gates of Hades shall not prevail, but that they shall prevail against the other Apostles and the perfect? Does not the saying previously made, The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it, Matthew 16:18 hold in regard to all and in the case of each of them? And also the saying, Upon this rock I will build My church? Matthew 16:18 Are the keys of the kingdom of heaven given by the Lord to Peter only, and will no other of the blessed receive them? But if this promise, I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, Matthew 16:19 be common to the others, how shall not all the things previously spoken of, and the things which are subjoined as having been addressed to Peter, be common to them? For in this place these words seem to be addressed as to Peter only, Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, Matthew 16:19 etc.; but in the Gospel of John the Saviour having given the Holy Spirit unto the disciples by breathing upon them said, Receive the Holy Spirit, John 20:22 etc." (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/101612.htm>)

Matthew 16:1-20

Peter	The Other Disciples
4:18-19 Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother,... 19 And he saith unto them, Follow me	10:1 And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples
14:30 he cried, saying, Lord, save me. 31 And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?	8:25 And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish. 26 And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?
15:15 Then answered Peter and said unto him, Declare unto us this parable.	13:36 his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field.
16:16 Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.	14:33 Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.
16:17 Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.	13:16 But blessed are your eyes, ... and your ears, ... for they see ... for they hear
16:19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.	18:18 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
26:33 Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. 34 Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.	26:31-34 Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night:

Table 5: Parallels between Peter and the Other Disciples

Building Imagery in the NT

Against this background, let's survey the NT use of building language applied to Christ and the church. This is hardly the only place that we find such imagery.

It's always a good idea to start in the book you're studying for parallels. Matthew has used *πετρα* only once previously (chart):

Mat 7:24 Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a **rock**: 25 And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a **rock**.

In Matthew 7, as in the Lord's commendation of Peter, the *πετρα* serves as the foundation of a building. In Matthew 7, we are told what the rock represents: "these sayings of mine." It is a body of teaching, not a person (either Peter or the Lord). This would support the notion that the Lord has Peter's confession in mind when he speaks of the foundation of the church.

Peter himself provides a very important passage for understanding the architectural imagery in the NT, though not necessarily in the way that it is usually cited.

Matthew 16:1-20

1Pe 2:3 If so be ye have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious. 4 To whom coming, *as unto* a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, *and* precious, 5 Ye also, as **lively stones**, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. 6 Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a **chief corner stone**, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. 7 Unto you therefore which believe *he is* precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the **head of the corner**, 8 And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, *even to them* which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.

Peter assembles a collection of verses from the OT that describe our Lord as two kinds of architectural stones, a “chief corner stone” and “the head of the corner,” and he extends the metaphor to include believers. Figure 3 (chart) shows the relation of these components.

- The bedrock is not mentioned in 1 Peter, but Matt 7:24-25 describes it, and it may be in view in 16:18 as well.
- The “chief corner stone” defines the location and orientation of the building.
- The “foundation” (not mentioned by Peter) sets the extent of the building.
- Individual believers (including Peter!) are “lively” or “living stones” (the same term that describes the Lord in v. 4) that make up the walls.
- The “head of the corner” is the final stone that crowns the entire structure.¹⁶

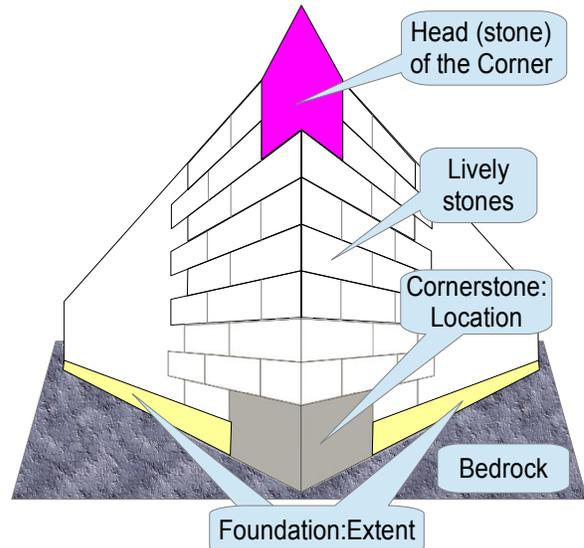


Figure 3: Architectural imagery in the NT

Throughout this passage, with the exception of “rock of offense,” Peter does not mention either *πετρος* or *πετρα*. Following the LXX, he uses the much more common word *λιθος* (302x in the OT. vs. 101 for *πετρα*). This passage is not using the vocabulary of Matt 16:19, but it summarizes the imagery.

Paul also picks up the metaphor of a building to describe his work. He is the one who introduces the detail of the foundation (chart):

1Co 3:10 According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the **foundation**, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. 11 For other **foundation** can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ In addition to these terms, we might consider “pillar,” discussed in the notes.

Matthew 16:1-20

Peter said that the cornerstone and headstone were Christ. Now Paul says that the foundation is Christ, but he laid that foundation. What we know about our Lord was written by the apostles in the books of the NT. Much more could have been written, but the Spirit guided them to select what we needed to know. The historical person of Jesus, sent by the Father, is the cornerstone who fixes the location and orientation of the building, but the foundation, the instruction of the apostles (the keepers of the keys of knowledge), establishes its extent.

At first glance, Paul seems to contradict this statement when he writes to the Ephesians:

Eph 2:19 Now therefore ye ... 20 ... are built upon the **foundation** of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner *stone*;

If Jesus Christ is the only foundation, what is “the foundation of the apostles and prophets”? Remember that the Greek construction indicated by the word “of” has a number of meanings (chart).¹⁷ One meaning is apposition, as in the expression, “the sign of circumcision” (Rom 4:11), which means that the sign is circumcision. If this is the use here, then Paul is calling the apostles and prophets the foundation, which is in tension with 1 Cor 3:11. But another use is the subjective genitive, in which the word before the “of” has a verbal sense, and the word after the “of” indicates the subject of the verb, the doer of the action, as in the expression, “the coming of the Son of Man” (Matt 24:27--the Son of Man is the one who is coming). If Paul is using the subjective genitive here, then he means to say that the foundation is laid (“founded”) by the apostles and prophets, which agrees exactly with what he says in 1 Cor 3:10.¹⁸

What shall we say, then, about Peter and the Rock?

- Consistent with Matt 7:24-25, the rock is the teaching about the Lord Jesus.
- Peter, in uttering his confession, shows that he is a “scribe prepared unto the kingdom of heaven,” able to bring out of the storehouse the truths that the people of God need. He, with the other apostles, laid the foundation, built out the NT teaching of the person and work of the Lord Jesus. The stone that defines our Lord as “the Christ, the son of God,” has his name on it, and he is given a name that commemorates that important foundational truth that he has laid.
- But he is not alone in this work. Though often in front of the disciples, he is not over them. Together, they have provided the revelation of our Lord that we enjoy today.
- We in turn are stones in the temple that God is building.

¹⁷ Wallace in his grammar distinguishes 29 different uses!

¹⁸ Rev 21:14 describes the name of the apostles on the twelve foundations of the city of God. The imagery here is no longer the church, so the metaphor may be different, but it would not be inconsistent to interpret it in line with the argument here.

Notes

Peter and the Rock

The table shows the correspondences with Hebrew.

The word for “stone” would be λιθος, not some derivative of πετρ-. Probably the central word that the Lord has in mind is the more common πετρα, and he calls Simon πετρος just to make the ending masculine to fit his biological gender.

	סלע	צור	אבן	Totals
πετρος	7	1		13
πετρα	44	29		111
λιθος			208	302
Totals	62	81	272	

Pillars of the Temple

In addition to the architectural terms discussed in the text, it is encouraging to consider the term “pillar.”

A final architectural term is “pillar,” which appear twice of individuals. Three of the apostles bear this title in Galatians:

Gal 2:9 And when James, Cephas [Peter], and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we *should go* unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.

But any believer who overcomes is promised such a role:

Rev 3:12 Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out:

When we think of pillars in the temple, our mind naturally goes to 1 Kings 7. Two of Solomon’s building projects had pillars. One was the house of the forest of Lebanon, an armory (10:17), which had forty-five cedar pillars supporting its roof. Going into the building must have been like entering a forest. The temple also had pillars, but only two are mentioned, made of bronze, and they were part of the porch, for decoration and not to hold up the roof of the temple.

1Ki 7:21 And he set up the pillars in the porch of the temple: and he set up the right pillar, and called the name thereof Jachin [“He will establish”]: and he set up the left pillar, and called the name thereof Boaz [“In him is strength”].

Like the pillars of the church in Jerusalem, these pillars have names. And their names reflect the power of God, just as a believer who overcomes in the struggles of this life is a living testimony to the sustaining power of God.