



TGP: Acts 9

BY G. AL WRIGHT, JR.

DAMASCUS

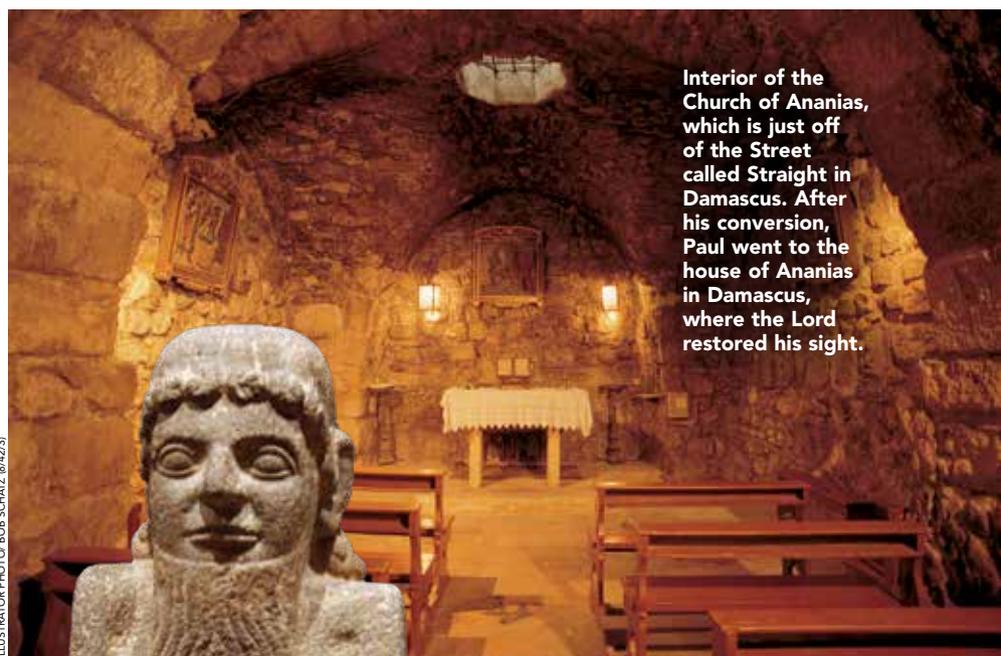
A BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

DESCRIBING DAMASCUS, Mark Twain said, “Damascus is beautiful from the mountain. It is beautiful even to foreigners accustomed to luxuriant vegetation, and I can easily understand how unspeakably beautiful it must be to eyes that are only used to the...barrenness and desolation of Syria.”¹ Another author referred to Damascus as a “beautiful white city on a green plain.”² Many today consider the city to be the paradise of the world. One writer addressed the four differing routes a traveler could take to enter the city from any of the four points of the compass; each has its own intrigue for the traveler who comes either from the coast to the west or the desert to the east. This article will give attention to the history of Damascus, to the significance of this city, and to the role it plays in the Bible.

In History

Damascus is known as the oldest inhabited city in the world. It is mentioned as early as the ancient Ebla Tablets (ca. 2400–2250 BC). One ancient historian attributes the founding of the city to Uz, one of the sons of Aram and thus Noah’s grandson. Some believe the city was first referred to as Dimaski. The Armana letters (ca. 1400–1340 BC) mention Damascus by the name Dimashqua. The current English name seems to have come by way of its name in Greek from when Alexander the Great and his successors ruled the land.

Located 135 miles northeast of Jerusalem, Damascus is on the trade route that connected Mesopotamia to Egypt. Making the journey on foot from Jerusalem to Damascus would take about six days. The city is 2,300 feet above sea level and just northeast of Mount Hermon. Damascus was at the intersection of major trade routes and thus a haven for commercial and military industries. Although the city



Interior of the Church of Ananias, which is just off of the Street called Straight in Damascus. After his conversion, Paul went to the house of Ananias in Damascus, where the Lord restored his sight.



Left: Statue of a seated man, from northwest Syria or southeastern Turkey, Neo-Hittite or Aramean, mid-9th-mid-8th centuries BC. This statue undoubtedly came from one of

the Neo-Hittite or Aramean city-states that flourished on the western periphery of the Assyrian Empire just prior to Assyria’s conquest of the region about 740 BC.

was strategically located for travel and business, most would have considered Damascus to be a second-tier city. The city’s long-standing and strategic influence was indirectly proportionate to its size. That is particularly important when we know something about the peaks and valleys of its history.

Kings and kingdoms constantly fought over Damascus from the time of King David (ruled 1005–965 BC) until its conquest by the Roman armies. The city was under the jurisdiction of and therefore served Assyria; Babylonia;

Persia; Greece; and finally Rome, which made all of Syria a Roman province in 64 BC. The city knew no notoriety at all until the arrival of the Arameans, an eleventh- to eighth-century BC Aramaic-speaking tribal confederacy that brought a language and lifestyle to the area that increased its strategic influence. The Arameans were the first, for example, to undertake the kind of work that improved the productivity of the oasis. They built canals that fed from the rivers into the oasis. They developed sophisticated irrigation systems. They also brought their language, which became the *lingua franca* for Damascus and that part of the world. The city became well known for its woolen cloth and grain. This period that promoted the city’s prominence during a season would not stabilize Damascus for all time. Instead, the city time and again

became the centerpiece in battles for power and prominence between larger countries. Scripture vividly portrays Damascus as a ball in a high-stakes Ping-Pong match.

In Scripture

Scripture contains numerous references to Damascus. Using a canonical rather than a chronological perspective, I want to point out some of those references as they relate the city's strategic significance. Genesis 15:2 is the first text to mention Damascus. This pivotal chapter in Genesis describes God making a covenant with Abram. God had promised Abram an heir but at this point his only heir was Eliezer of Damascus. Eliezer was a steward for Abram with significant responsibilities.

Moving canonically, 1 Kings 11:23-25 states that Rezon became a leader in opposition to Solomon; he gathered others who were equally opposed to Solomon. Rezon took his band of marauders to Damascus where they crowned him king. Damascus evidently provided Rezon both a place of retreat and refuge and at the same time was a significant enough place from which he could launch his campaign against his adversaries.

Scripture next mentions Damascus in 2 Kings 5. Here, Naaman was the commander of the armies of the king of Syria. He was a leper. A servant girl from Israel told Naaman's wife

Right: Ruins of Tel Mardikh, which was known as Ebla in ancient Syria.

Lower right: One of the Ebla Tablets. In the 1960s, archaeologists unearthed about 20,000 tablets inscribed with details of everyday life in the city of Ebla late in the 3rd millennium BC. Written in Sumerian script, the tablets contain many of the same names of people and places that are in the Old Testament plus stories that are similar to the biblical accounts of the flood, the tower of Babel, and creation. The people of Ebla, however, did not know or worship Yahweh; instead, they worshiped several gods, including Dagan, Ishtar, Enki, Ninki, and others.



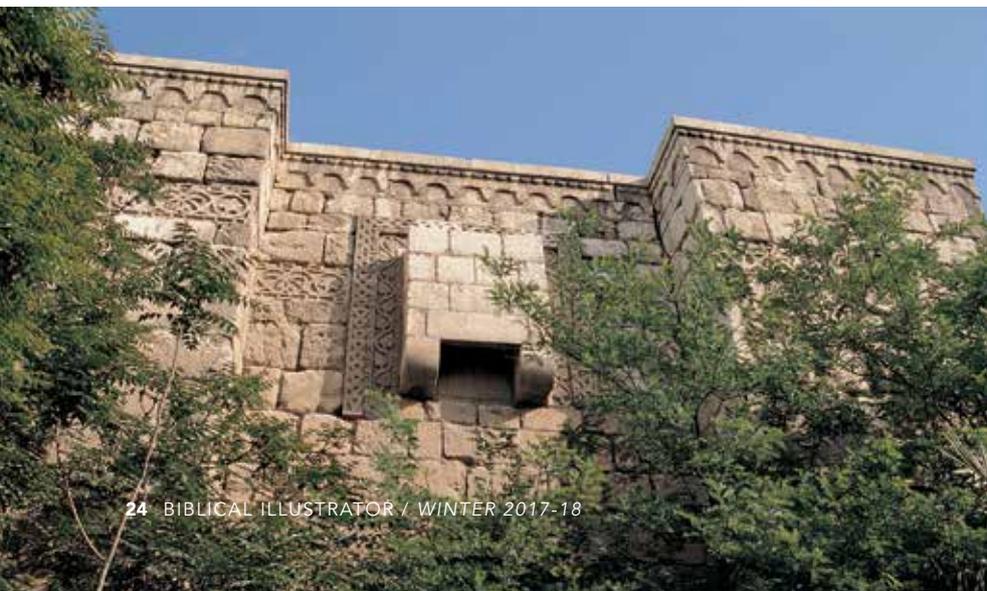
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / LOUISE KOHL SMITH (34/8/6)

PUBLIC DOMAIN

about the power of God in Elisha. Naaman's wife urged him to go to this prophet for healing. He did. Elisha told Naaman to go dip in the Jordan River seven times and the leprosy would leave him. He finally did it and was healed. At first, though, he was angry since he saw the Abana and Pharpar Rivers of Damascus, which were the

two main rivers in Syria, as being far more significant than the Jordan.

The final mention before the prophetic books is in 2 Kings 16:9, which is the historical background for Isaiah 7. Syria's King Rezon joined alliances with Israel's King Pekah to come against King Ahaz and the Kingdom of Judah. Ahaz sought help from Isaiah who gave him the powerfully



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / BOB SCHATZ (8/4/16)

Left: When Paul's life was endangered in Damascus, "his disciples took him by night and lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the wall" (Acts 9:25, CSB). His disciples

may have been converts who heard Paul's message at the local synagogue. Shown is the traditional site where Paul was let down out of the window and over the wall at Damascus.



The Barada River in Damascus. In the Old Testament it was known as the Abana River, and it was there Naaman wanted to wash instead of the Jordan as instructed by Elisha (2 Kings 5:12).

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prophetic words about the virgin conceiving and giving birth to the child that would be called “Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14). Ahaz also asked for help from Assyria’s King Tiglath-pileser, who responded by attacking and capturing Damascus. Ahaz met Tiglath-pileser in Damascus and there saw an altar that he then replicated for the Jerusalem Temple.

The final Old Testament words about Damascus speak of judgment. They are in Isaiah (17:1-3), Jeremiah (49:23-27), and Amos (1:3). In the midst of these words of judgment, however, God spoke of Damascus. He saw this city that had been in existence for so long and had such a checkered history as “the city of [His] joy” (Jer. 49:25, ESV).

A City of Refuge

History shows that many saw Damascus as a city of refuge—the kind of place where people could find protection and enjoy peace. For example, Jews, even during the time of Jesus and Paul, had a peace-seeking and peace-loving group, the Essenes. Their

most famous community was near the Dead Sea at Qumran. Evidence indicates another band of Essenes made their way to Damascus.

Additionally, Rome’s General Pompey (106–48 BC) sent two of his leaders to Damascus two years before Rome gained full control of Syria. He saw control of Damascus as strategic to Roman rule in the area.

Further, Damascus was home to a large Jewish population, many finding refuge in the city’s synagogues. Some of those Jews who found refuge in Damascus found true refuge in Jesus. These were the Jews Saul was seeking as he made his way on that six-day journey from Jerusalem to Damascus.³

After his conversion on the road to Damascus, however, Saul sought refuge with believers in the city. In the synagogues of Damascus, Saul preached that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 9:8-20).

The last mention of Damascus in Scripture is not a story of refuge but is instead one of escape. Second Corinthians describes Paul

being lowered in a basket through a window in a wall (2 Cor. 11:32). He thereby escaped Damascus and the grasp of an ethnarch serving under King Aretas. Paul offered no further details about the incident. Some have conjectured, though that this “probably occurred during his stint in Arabia (Gal 1:17) and had something to do with his preaching.”⁴

Today we hear of this same Damascus primarily in the news as a place of battles and bloodshed. As in the days of David, Damascus remains a city where powers fight for dominance. 💧

1. Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (NP: American Publishing, 1869), 455

2. R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996), 128.

3. I am deeply indebted to the full-length treatment of the history and significance of the city of Damascus by Ross Burns, *Damascus: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

4. David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 505.

G. Al Wright, Jr. is pastor of First Baptist Church, Waynesboro, Georgia.