

What is the significance of Damascus in the Bible?

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One of the oldest cities in the world, Damascus was, and still is, the capital of Syria. The oasis city sits on the edge of the Syrian-Arab desert about 130 miles northeast of Jerusalem and is said to be one of the most beautiful cities in all of western Asia. Damascus plays a significant role in both the Old and New Testaments and is perhaps best remembered as the scene of Paul's dramatic encounter with the risen Christ and the place where he converted to Christianity.

In Bible times, Damascus lay at least a six-day journey on foot from Jerusalem. Northeast of Mount Hermon and about 50 miles from the Mediterranean coast, Damascus was a leading commercial and transportation center. The city's location along a river at the crossroads of two major international highways (the Via Maris and the King's Highway) guaranteed its prosperity and importance.

Although Damascus is close to the desert, ample supplies of water from two rivers allow the region to support vineyards and abundant crops of fruits, grains, nuts, cotton, wool, silk, olives, and tobacco. The Abana River (known today as the Barada) is the primary water source for Damascus. It flows from the northwest mountains through a deep ravine into the city. The Pharpar River (now el-A waj) runs on the outskirts of Damascus, supplying the gardens and orchards. Together these rivers irrigate about 400 square miles of land.

The first mention of Damascus in the Bible is in connection with Abraham's rescue of Lot after he was kidnapped by a confederation of Mesopotamian kings (Genesis 14:15).

Abraham's senior servant Eliezer was from Damascus (Genesis 15:2).

The Bible does not refer to the city again until the time of David when Damascus and its kings began numerous dealings with Israel. As part of the Aramaean confederacy, Damascus was often associated with wars against Israel. King David eventually conquered the Aramaean kingdom of Syria (2 Samuel 8:5-6), but King Rezin of Damascus regained control of Syria during Solomon's reign (1 Kings 11:23-25).

After Solomon's death, Israel was divided into two kingdoms, and Damascus increased in power. At different times, both Israel and Judah made pacts with the ruling kings of Damascus (1 Kings 15:18-20). Eventually, this led to Damascus dominating both Hebrew kingdoms. For the remainder of the Old Testament, both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel remained entangled with Damascus in battles for control.

Naaman, the Syrian commander who encountered Elisha, lived in Damascus. In 2 Kings 5:12, when Elisha told Naaman to wash in the muddy waters of the Jordan River to be cured of leprosy, he angrily answered, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?"

The Bible contains a startling prophecy concerning Damascus: "A prophecy against Damascus: 'See, Damascus will no longer be a city but will become a heap of ruins'" (Isaiah 17:1). The destruction of Damascus that Isaiah foretold was linked to the defeat of the northern kingdom of Israel, called "Ephraim" here: "The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim, and royal power from Damascus" (verse 3). This prophecy could have been fulfilled c. 732 BC when the Assyrians attacked Aram: "Ahaz [king of Judah] sent messengers to say to Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, 'I am your servant and

vassal. Come up and save me out of the hand of the king of Aram and of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.’ And Ahaz took the silver and gold found in the temple of the Lord and in the treasuries of the royal palace and sent it as a gift to the king of Assyria. The king of Assyria complied by attacking Damascus and capturing it. He deported its inhabitants to Kir and put Rezin [king of Aram] to death” (2 Kings 16:7-9). Other Bible scholars believe that Isaiah’s prophecy against Damascus will not be completely fulfilled until the end times.

Damascus was later rebuilt and remained an influential city until New Testament times, flourishing as a major cultural center with numerous synagogues and a large Jewish community. Saul of Tarsus was traveling to Damascus to continue his zealous persecution of Christians when he had a life-changing encounter with the risen Christ. Struck blind, Saul was led into Damascus where he converted to Christianity and later became known as the apostle Paul. At that time Damascus was ruled by the Nabatean King Aretas. After becoming a Christian, Paul began to testify of his salvation in the synagogues of Damascus. A plot to end his life forced Paul to escape the city in a basket let down from the city wall (Acts 9:1-25; 22:6-21; 26:12-18; 2 Corinthians 11:32, 33).