

CHAPTER XIV

THE DECAPOLIS

ORIGIN. DAMASCUS. SCYTHOPOLIS. CITIES EAST OF THE SEA OF GALILEE. GADARA. PELLA AND DION. GERASA. PHILADELPHIA. JESUS IN THE DECAPOLIS.

1. Origin.---Three times in the Gospels the Decapolis is mentioned: Matthew 4:25; Mark 5:20 and 7:31. Decapolis is a Greek name and means “the ten city” (region). The ancient writers who mention it agree that it originally consisted of ten cities in which Greek population was dominant and which were federated together. Pliny gives the ten cities as belonging to it. In the time of Christ it probably consisted of but ten. The Decapolis apparently was created by the Roman General Pompey, when he conquered this region for Rome in 65-63 B.C. These cities with Greek populations appear to have appealed to him and he granted them certain privileges, including a degree of autonomy. They were, however, subject to the Legate of Syria. Hippos, Scythopolis, and Pella were released by this time from the Jewish yoke. Josephus, at the end of the first century A.D., does not reckon Damascus in the Decapolis, but before the time of Paul, Damascus had been captured by the Nabataens or Arabians, and may not, when retaken by Rome, have been again accorded the privileges of the cities of the Decapolis.

2. Damascus, which is mentioned in the annals of Thothmes III before 1447 B.C., and in the accounts of Abraham (Gen. 14:15; 15:2), has been continuously in existence as a city ever since, and is one of the most flourishing cities of Syria at the present time. It was occupied in the thirteenth or fourteenth century B.C. by Aramaeans who held it all through the Old Testament period. Kings of Damascus frequently fought with Israel. From the time of Alexandria the Great it came under Hellenic influences. After

Historia Naturalis, V, xviii, 74.
Josephus, Wars of the Jews, I, vii, 7.

his death it was first possessed by the Ptolemies of Egypt, but was taken by the Seleucid kings of Antioch before 261 B.C. It is situated in one of the most fertile oases of the world---an oasis that Arabian poets delighted to compare to Paradise. Probably Alexander’s successors, who, as we shall see, built many Hellenic cities, beautified this oasis with one of them, but as the site has been occupied continually, no buildings from this time remain. One feature at Damascus that still recalls Biblical times is the street called Straight, which runs westward from the eastern gate into the heart of the city. It was in a house on the ancient forerunner of this street that Paul first lodged at the time of his conversion (Acts 9:11), (see Fig. 266).

One other part of Damascus recalls a Biblical narrative. This is the river Barada which still runs through the heart of the city. It is the river called Abana in 2 Kings 5:12, and was said by Naaman to be “better than all the waters of Israel”; (see Fig. 265).

3. Scythopolis was the only one of the cities of the Decapolis west of the Jordan. It was on the site of the Beth-shan of the Old Testament (Josh. 17:11; 1 Sam. 31:10, 12; 2 Sam. 21:12; 1 Kings 4:12). Beth-shan was already a city at the time Palestine was conquered by Thothmes III, Seti I, and Ramses II, and there had been a town near it ever since. It seems to have been called Scythopolis by the successors of Alexander the Great, probably because a group of Scythians had taken the city and settled there. When it came into the possession of Scythians we can only conjecture, but it was probably at the time of the great Scythian invasion of Palestine, about 625-

615 B.C. This invasion called forth the dark prophecies of the book of Zephaniah. Scythopolis appears from certain coins to have become a Hellenic city in the time of Alexander the Great. In the time of Ptolemy Euergetes I, 247-222 B.C., it was subject to Egypt, but it passed to the dominions of the Seleucidae of Antioch in 198 B.C. Upon the break up of the Syrian empire in 64-63 B.C., Pompey made it one of the cities of the Decapolis.

The remains of the Hellenic city have now entirely disappeared with the exception of the great stone amphitheater. This may still be seen in the valley on the south side of the mound which covers the ruins of the ancient Beth-shan, where it is overgrown with.

Schurer, *Geschichte des Jüdischen Volkes in Zeitalter Jesu Christi*, Leipzig
Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XII
Barton, *A Year's Wandering in Bible Lands*, Philadelphia, 1904, p. 176

257

briers. The name Scythopolis has long since disappeared, and the old Hebrew name for the place still survives in the name of the modern town Beisan. This modern town is situated on the south side of the valley mentioned about, a little distance from the mound, which covers the ancient city. Scythopolis was situated at the point where the plain of Jezreel or Esdraelon joins the Jordan valley. In the time of Christ the Jews from Nazareth and its vicinity, when going to the three annual festivals at Jerusalem, came down the plain and then followed the Jordan valley down to Jericho (see Luke 19:1), in order to avoid going through Samaria. From the time that Jesus was twelve years old he must, therefore, have often passed by Scythopolis on his way to Jerusalem. As it was a Gentile town, however, neither he nor his companions would enter it on such occasions, as they would thereby be rendered unclean.

4. Cities East of the Sea of Galilee.---To the east of the Sea of Galilee lay three of the cities of the Decapolis. Hippos was comparatively near the sea, where Susiye now lies. The Jews of the Talmudic period called the place Susitha. Hippos is the Greek for horse. Susitha is a Hebrew translation of this and Susiye is an Arabic corruption of the Hebrew translation of this and Susiye is an Arabic corruption of the Hebrew. All traces of the ancient Hippos except the name have disappeared. (Hippos has been located above En Gedi/Lake Tiberias on a horse shaped mesa---DQH)

Where Raphana was situated has not yet been definitely determined. It is probably the same as Raphon mentioned in 1 Maccabees 5:37, which was near to Ashteroth-karnaim (Gen 14:5). Asheroth-karnaim was situated either at Tell Ashtara or at Tell Ashary, both or which are between twenty and twenty-five miles east of the Sea of Galilee. Raphana, then, probably lay about twenty miles due east from Hippos.

Still eastward of this lay the city of Kanatha, though scholars are divided in opinion as to whether its site is to be identified with El-Kerak or Kanawat. If its site was at El-Kerak it was about forty miles east of the Sea of Galilee; if at Kanawat it was about fifty-five miles distant from the sea. As there are at Kanawat abundant ruins of a beautiful Hellenic city. Kanatha was probably situated here rather than at El-Kerak. This was the Kenath of Numbers 32:42.

5. Gadara.---A little to the south of the southern end of the Sea of Galilee on the east of the Jordan and south of the Yarmuk lay the city of Gadara, another member of the Decapolis. Its site is

Neubauer, *Geographie du Talmud*, Paris, 1868
Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XII, viii, 4.
Brunnow and Domaszowski, *Provincia Arabia*, III, 107-144, and Fig. 267

258

now marked by the ruins of Umm Keis or Mukes. Here ruins of the Hellenic city are still to be seen, including a great theater cut out of the black basaltic rock. Gadara was a strong fortress as early as the time of Antiochus the Great in 218 B.C., and was afterward besieged by Alexander Jannaeus, 104-79 B.C.

6. Pella and Dion.---On the east of the Jordan, a little further south than Scythopolis or Bethshan, but in the deep depression of the river valley, Pella, another city of the Decapolis, was situated. The site now bears the name Fahl. The city is mentioned in the list of Thothmes III, 1503-1447 B.C. as Pahal. In the El-Amarna letters it is called Pihili. Pella is a Greek form of this name. The Greek city of Pella is said by Stephen of Byzantium to have been founded by Alexander the Great and was apparently not far from Pella. It is thought by Merrill and G.A. Smith to have been situated on the site of the modern Eidun, about twenty miles east of Pella, though that is doubted by others. If Dion was this point few, if any, antiquities remain to bear witness to the fact.

7. Gerasa, the modern Jerash, lay on one of the tributaries of the Jabbok about fifty miles southeast of Pella. We do not know what the name of the place was in Old Testament times. It is first mentioned in the time of Alexander Jannaeus (104-79 B.C.). It was then called Gerasa and was probably already at that time a Hellenic city. By whom it was built, we do not know, but it was probably one of the early Ptolemies of Egypt. From 100 B.C. till the Mohammedan conquest in 637, as there are no Arabic remains above the Graeco-Roman material. In the year 1121 Baldwin II, of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, made a campaign against

Polybius V.

Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XIII, XIII, 3.

Merrill, *East of the Jordan*, New York, 1883

Brunnow and Domaszewski, *Provincia Arabia*

Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, I iv. 8.

Gerasa where the ruler of Damascus had caused a castle to be built. In the next century the Arabian geographer, Yakut, describes it as deserted. It appears to have been ruined by an earthquake.

Apparently the Hellenic city at Gerasa lasted longer than any of the other cities of the Decapolis unless it be Kanatha. One can accordingly, gain from the ruins of Gerasa as an excellent site from the south he faced a beautiful arched gateway. After passing this gateway one looked northward down a long colonnaded street, which at a little distance from the gate broadened out into a circular forum. At distances approximately equal from one another this main street was crossed by other colonnaded streets. A number of two imposing temples, of two theaters, of a large Christian basilica, and of various other buildings impress one with the former glory of the city. A number of the buildings at Gerasea were built in the second century A.D. in the region of the Antonines (see Figs. 268, 269).

8. Philadelphia. The most southerly of the cities of the Decapolis, was on the site of Rabbah-Ammon (Deut. 3:11; Josh. 13:25; 2 Sam. 11:1, etc.). This was situated on the upper Jabbok about twenty miles east of the Jordan valley, where Amman now lies. The Hellenic city here was built by Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt, who reigned from 293-247 B.C. It was named Philadelphia after him. In 218 B.C. the city was taken by Antiochus III, who captured the cistern to which in time of siege the Philadelphians went for water by an underground passage, after which thirst compelled them to surrender. Joab centuries before had captured the city for David by the same method, and in 30 B.C. Herod the Great again took it in the same way. The remains of the

Hellenic temple, of the theater, and of other buildings, including a Christian basilica, are still to be seen at Amman. In the fourth century

Barton, *A Year's wandering in Bible Lands*

A.D. Philadelphia was one of the prominent cities of the Roman province of Arabia (see Figs. 270, 271).

These cities of the Decapolis appear to have been built on a similar plan. Each had a colonnaded street through the center of the town, each had at least one temple and one theater, and some of them more. All were architecturally beautiful. They all possessed a similar government also, and each appears to have controlled the villages in its district.

9. Jesus in the Decapolis.---The prevailing influences in the Decapolis were pagan, and yet there were Jews living in it, for multitudes of them from the Decapolis followed Jesus (Matt. 4:25). On at least two occasions our Lord himself went into the territory of the Decapolis. We read in Mark 5:1 that Jesus and his disciples "came to the other side of the sea to the country of the Gerasenes." The country to which Jesus came at this time cannot have been that of the Decapoliitan city Gerasa, for, as we have seen, that lay far to the south. It was in a direct line nearly fifty miles from the Sea of Galilee. Neither can it have been to the region of Gadara that he came, for Gadara lay at least five miles to the south across the deep valley of the Yarmuk. There was, however, on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee a town called Gergesa, the modern Kursi. This place was near the city of Hippos, and possible one of the towns subordinate to Hippos. As Jesus and the disciples walked back from the sea they met the demoniac, whom Jesus healed. It was in connection with this healing that the herd of swine was destroyed---an incident that could happen in no part of Palestine except Decapolis or Philistia, for swine were unclean to Jews and they never kept them. The demoniac when cured went and preached Jesus in the Decapolis (Mark 5:20).

Again toward the end of his ministry, Jesus, after he had withdrawn for a time to Phoenicia, returned by crossing the high lands of northern Galilee and coming down east of the Jordan "through the midst of the borders of Decapolis" (Mark 7:31).