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Damascus during the Time of Paul

Damascus is one of the oldest, continuously inhabited cities of the world. First serving as the capital of the Persian satrapy, the Seleucids later transferred this seat to Antioch. Although **Damascus** fell under Roman rule with Pompey's conquest of the region in 64 BC, Pompey allowed the ruling Nabatean kingdom to continue to govern until Antony gave **the city** to Cleopatra in 34 BC. **It** apparently remained in Roman hands until 34 BC, when scholars conclude on the basis of **Second Corinthians 11:32-33** that **it** numbered among the cities of the east side of the Jordan, being given by Gaius Caligula to the Nabatean king Aretas IV (**Josephus Antiquities of the Jews 13.392, 414**). As the northernmost city of the Decapolis **it** nevertheless enjoyed municipal freedom within the latter's loose federation. **The city** lay on two great ancient highways: *The Via Maris* - the coastal highway running through the Jezreel Valley down to Ashkelon and Gaza and continuing to Egypt through the Sinai desert - and the King's Highway which ran southwards across Trachonitis, Batanaea, and Bostra and then across to Rabbat Ammon through the cities of Mo'ab and Edom until it crossed over the Negev and Sinai from Eilat into Egypt. It was also connected to the trade routes southwards to Mecca and east to Bagdad.

Although lesser in importance than Antioch, the **Jewish** community in **Damascus** apparently numbered in the thousands. **Luke** indicates that there were several synagogues in **the city (Acts 9:20)** and, despite the dubious historical accuracy of the figures, Josephus reports that 10,500 (or 18,000) were massacred during the outbreaks leading up to the Revolt in 66 AD (**Josephus Jewish War 2.561, 7.368**). He also indicates that the women of **Damascus** were so drawn to **Judaism** that when their husbands were plotting to massacre **the Jews** in 66 AD that they had to hide their plans from their wives (**Josephus Jewish War 2.561**).

It is also possible that members of the Dead Sea Scrolls community at Qumran sought refuge from the high priestly persecution in "the land of **Damascus**." The messianic/eschatological convictions held by such communities may have created fertile ground for faithfulness in **Yeshua as the Messiah**. **Luke's** description of **Ananias as a devout man according to the Torah (Acts 22:12)** possibly suggests that **Ananias** was connected to the righteous of the TaNaKh at Qumran - an idea perhaps corroborated by **his** laying on of hands to heal Paul (**Acts 9:17-18**), a practice known from Qumran.

The Messianic community in **Damascus** may have been established by pilgrims who had come to Yerushalayim for Shavu'ot and, having heard the proclamation of the gospel (see the commentary on **Acts**, to see link click [An - Peter Speaks to the Shavu'ot Crowd](#)), returned to **Damascus**. Although list in **Acts 2:9** does not specifically mention **Syria**, **Pontus** and **Asia Minor** are included, and the reference to the scattering of the believers **throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria** in **Acts 8:1** may not exclude further reaches, as **Acts 11:19** indicates. Once those new believers had returned home from Tziyon, together with those who may have later fled from the Holy City, they may have well established their own community to which others were then attracted. A network of communication was already operating between Jerusalem and **Damascus** since the believers in **Damascus** had heard of Paul's persecution of the Messianic community in the City of David. **Ananias** indicates that **many** people had brought reports about **Paul's** activities to **Damascus (Acts 9:13 and 21; Galatians 1:22ff)** - although it is difficult to determine whether or not these were believers.²⁴