

# Scenes of Syria

## 5. City walls, Damascus

We saw in our last article that the grid plan layout of the old city of Damascus dates from Greek times—after passing through the hands of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians, Damascus was taken by Alexander the Great after the Battle of Issus in 333 B.C. However, the surviving walls of the city were not begun until the Roman era. This is not to say that there were no defences in earlier times, for the prophet Jeremiah speaks of events to be fulfilled in his own day, when God would “set fire to the wall of Damascus” (49:27, NASB), referring to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar sweeping down from the north to overwhelm not only Judah but the surrounding Gentile nations too.

The walls of Damascus have been rebuilt a number of times over the centuries. Those which exist today, five kilometres in circumference, date largely from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, but they do follow the same route as the Roman walls. Indeed, very often the lower courses of the walls consist of building work clearly more ancient

than the mediaeval stones above, and remains from Roman times lie scattered about the city.

Paul's conversion to the gospel was followed by vigorous efforts to convince the Jews in Damascus of the Messiahship of Jesus. This preaching campaign resulted in Paul's first experience of persecution from his fellow countrymen, and it was over the Roman city walls that Paul had to be lowered in a basket to escape them. Comparing the two New Testament accounts of this (Acts 9:22-25; 2 Cor. 11:32,33), the plot to seize Paul was apparently instigated by the Jews but put into effect by the city governor. The King Aretas mentioned by Paul was father to Phasaelis, divorced by Herod the Tetrarch so he could marry Herodias, the wife of his own brother Philip—a union denounced by John the Baptist.

Only one city gate from Roman times survives in Damascus, and we'll explore this in our next article, God willing.—*Jeremy Thomas*



Pictures: Jeremy Thomas