

Scenes of Syria

4. Straight Street, Damascus

One place in Damascus which has not changed its name in 2,000 years is “the street which is called Straight” (Acts 9:11). Obviously there have been changes in its appearance during that time; Straight Street was not roofed in, as it is now, in Paul’s day; and, as the debris of successive generations collects, street level steadily rises, leaving the modern pavement four metres above its first-century level. The original street was also four times wider than it is today, and lined with stone columns (fragments of which remain).

It was apparently on this street, in the house of Judas (otherwise unknown to us, but presumably a Jewish convert to the gospel) that Paul lodged, in darkness for three days (a kind of death and resurrection experience of his own) until he was visited by Ananias, who cured him of his blindness

and baptised him in the name of the Lord Jesus. It was the start of a remarkable discipleship, recorded for us in unparalleled detail in Acts and the epistles, and it all began on this very street.

The description ‘Straight Street’ is derived from the Latin *Via Recta*, the name given by the Romans to the *decumanus maximus*, or main east-west thoroughfare, of Damascus. We may be familiar with the idea of Roman cities being built on a grid plan of north-south and east-west streets, intersecting at right-angles and forming *insulae* or separate blocks of buildings, but the idea was actually taken from the Greeks. The ancient street plan of Damascus was designed by the fifth-century-B.C. Greek architect and polymath Hippodamus of Miletus, known as the father of town planning and responsible for similar work in Athens and Rhodes.

Something Paul might be familiar with, were he to see it today, is the row of shops on each side of Straight Street. It has remained a busy commercial centre along its 1,500-metre length since it was first built.—*Jeremy Thomas*

