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Straight Street

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STRAIGHT STREET (τὴν ῥύμην τὴν καλουμένην Εὐθεΐαν, *tēn rhymēn tēn kaloumenēn Eutheian*, “the street called straight”). The street in Damascus where Saul (Paul) met Ananias to be healed of his blindness following his conversion (Acts 9:11).

Biblical Relevance

Straight Street is mentioned only once in the New Testament, in connection with the account of Saul’s conversion (Acts 9:11). Saul was on his way to Damascus to seek out and arrest believers in Christ when light from heaven flashed around him (Acts 9:2–3). After falling down and hearing the voice of Jesus, he was blinded and led into Damascus (Acts 9:4–9).

In Damascus, God told a disciple named Ananias to go to Straight Street and “at Judas’ house look for a man from Tarsus named Saul” (Acts 9:11 NET). Knowing Saul was a persecutor of the church, Ananias protested, but the Lord insisted (Acts 9:15–16). Ananias went to Straight Street, where he prayed for Saul, who recovered his sight and was baptized (Acts 9:17–18). Saul stayed with other disciples in Damascus and preached Jesus in the synagogues (Acts 9:22). When his life was threatened (Acts 9:23), Saul left Damascus but later came back to the city (Gal 1:17; Burns, *Damascus*, 70).

Judas’ House and the Jewish-Christian Presence in Damascus

Damascus is the first place outside Palestine where there is reported to have been a community of Christians. Jewish settlement in Damascus dates to the Persian period; thus, they might have been Jews who had visited Jerusalem and there been exposed to the preaching of the gospel. Another possibility is that Jesus’ ministry around Lake Tiberias, which borders the Decapolis, might have touched Nabataeans or Aramaeans in his audience (Burns, *Damascus*, 69).

According to tradition, the house of Judas was located close to the west end of Straight Street (Bruce, *Acts*, 237). Wall comments that the Acts narrative mentioning names (Ananias, Judas) and places (Straight Street, house of Judas) may indicate these people were known in the church and that Judas’ home may have housed a synagogue of importance (Wall, “Acts,” 151). The house of Ananias was later commemorated by the Church of Ananias in the vicinity of Bab Sharqi (Burns, *Damascus*, 69).

The Ancient Straight Street

Roughly dating to the first century AD, Straight Street was constructed as the mile-long *decumanus maximus* of Damascus. In Roman city planning, a *decumanus* was an east/west-oriented street, and the *decumanus maximus* was the main *decumanus* of the city. Known in Latin as *Via Recta*, Straight Street was split into three parts by rows of magnificent columns.

Straight Street stretched from the east wall to the west wall of Damascus (Toussaint, “Acts,” 376). On the west side, it ended at a triple gateway (Masterman, “Damascus,” 72–73). At its eastern end was the gate that probably was called the Gate of the Sun—the present-day Bab Sharqi gate and the oldest surviving building of Damascus. From stylistic evidence, the building has been dated to the early years of the first century. Straight Street was a 26-meter-wide grand avenue bordered by arcaded pavements with shops on both sides where the central carriageway was 14 meters wide. The colonnades had the double function of affording a prestigious air to the avenue and offering protection from the sun for vendors and shoppers. The occasional deflections of the street were disguised by large monuments (Burns, *Damascus*, 56). The grandeur of this

decumanus reflected the privileged status given the city by Augustus. The construction of Straight Street, along with other projects, may have originated in a personal initiative from Augustus to demonstrate the greatness of Rome (Burns, *Damascus*, 57).

From the beginning it was probably less than perfectly straight, as it connected Aramaean settlements and made up the Greek city-plan's southern limit. Its longstanding crookedness has made it the object of sarcastic comments for two millennia (Burns, *Damascus*, 39).

The Modern Straight Street

Due to the efforts of Midhat Pasha, who became the governor of Damascus in 1878, the western half of Straight Street became the covered market *Suq Midhat Pasha*. The eastern half of the street is called the Avenue of Bab Sharqi. The columns along the avenue are gone except the first ones inside the Bab Sharqi gate (Burns, *Damascus*, 55). Because buildings over the centuries have encroached on both sides of the avenue, the present street is only one-fourth of its original width, with space only for one lane of traffic (Burns, *Monuments*, 119).

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