

Interesting Sights in Damascus, Oldest City in the World



VIEW OF DAMASCUS THE WORLD'S OLDEST CITY

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DAMASCUS—Stand with me on the slope of the Lebanon mountains and take a look over Damascus. We have climbed the road which was cut out for Kaiser Wilhelm, the emperor of Germany, when he visited this region ten years ago, and are now on a bare, loft hill, which the Mohammedans consider one of the holy spots of the world. It is where Mohammed stood and gazed at the magnificent town which Damascus was in his day. He stayed here for hours, and, then, turning away with a sigh, said:

I dare not go in. Men can enter paradise but once, and if I go into Damascus, this paradise on earth, I shall not be able to enter the paradise of the hereafter in heaven."

The Oldest City of the World.

According to the Mohammedans, Abraham first received the divine revelation of the unity of God in Damascus, and Josephus says that the town was founded by Uz, the great-grandson of Noah. The Bible tells us that Abraham had a steward who came from Damascus, and we know that King David besieged and conquered the place. There is no doubt that it is one of the oldest, if not the very oldest, town upon earth. It was in existence before the days of Rameses, before Alexandria sprang into greatness at the mouth of the Nile, and while Nebuchadnezzar was chewing grass in the gardens of Babylon. It was old before Athens had begun to be, and was already gray-haired when Rome was a baby. It antedates any of the cities of the present, and it is now one of the most thriving centers of the Mohammedan world.

The Rivers of Naaman.

Damascus lies on the eastern side of the Lebanon mountains about 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem, and, as the crow flies, about fifty-three miles from the Mediterranean sea. It is an oasis city, being surrounded by deserts. It is fed by two rivers which flow out of great springs in the mountains of Lebanon and make green this sandy plain in which they are lost. These two are the Abana and Pharpar of the Bible. You remember how Naaman, the leper, referred to them when Elisha told him to go and wash in the Jordan seven times and his flesh would be clean. Whereupon Naaman replied:

"Are not Abana and Pharpar rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage.

You remember also how one of his servants told Naaman that Elisha was asking a little thing of him and how he then went down and bathed in the Jordan, "and his flesh came again, like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

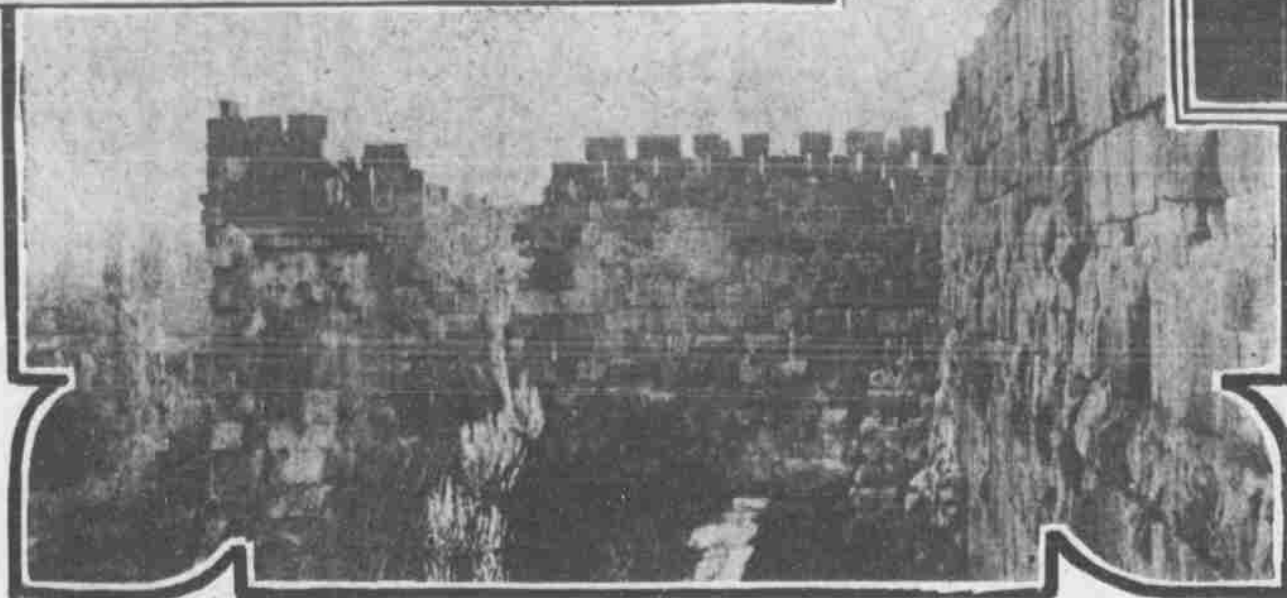
As we stand on the hill of Mohammed at the northwest end of the city and look at Damascus we do not wonder at Naaman's contempt of the Jordan. The latter is a winding rocky, semi-alkaline stream, which flows through a desert, the great gorge or depression of Ghor. It has a scanty vegetation along its banks and it flows through a valley of death to the great salt sea known as "The Dead Sea." The Abana and Pharpar are pure mountain streams, and the Abana is one of the most beautiful of the whole world. I have traveled along it almost to its source. It is a rushing river of pure, clear, green water, which spreads life over all that it touches. Together with the Pharpar it makes green the great plain which lies below us and builds up the orchards of almonds, apricots, apples and the rich crops which cover it, as well as the white city of Damascus which lies in its center.

A Pearl, a Spoon or a Camel.

Now, turn your eyes to the city itself. With its gardens and orchards surrounded by deserts it lies under these magnificent mountains. There are silver poplars within and without and the green shines over the houses. The town has been compared to a pearl. It is shaped very like one. My guide, Shammas, who stands beside me, tells me it looks like a camel, and a second glance shows me the head and neck of the beast reaching out to a point where lies a railway station of the road going to Mecca. The road itself is the long neck of the camel and farther back is the body, the minarets forming the hump. "Now, look again," says Shammas, "and see if it is not like a fan!" "Very much so," I reply, "and it is also like a great spoon with a long slender handle and large oval bowl."

To come down to details, Damascus is an expanse of pearly white, tinged with the pink of its roofs. The buildings rise high over the green, and out of them, like fingers pointing to heaven, are the minarets of 200 mosques, with the mighty dome of the great mosque in the center. At the right of the latter are the arched roofs of bazaars which have been famous for ages, and away off from the rest is a big yellow building with a roof of red tiles. That is the center of Mohammedan fanaticism. It is the barracks where thousands of Moslem soldiers are quartered. More than 12,000 troops are kept there, and in a time of uprisings and massacres, such as that of last spring, they form the greatest danger to Christians.

Damascus is a Mohammedan city. It has about 300,000 people and four-fifths of them follow the



WALL OF DAMASCUS OVER WHICH ST. PAUL WAS LET DOWN IN A BASKET

prophet. It has also about 30,000 Greeks, 8,000 Jews and lesser numbers of Syrians, Armenians, Persians and Druses. The city has Mohammedan schools and the students are as dangerous as those who denounced Colonel Roosevelt in the University at Cairo. These people are very devout. One sees them reading their Korans in their shops and at every mosque I observe a score or more of the faithful washing themselves before they go into their prayers. The mosques are full of turbaned old men and young men, who all pray singly and in groups, and in many one finds companies of worshippers under a leader. There are also male classes listening to the explanation of the Koran by the priests and there are men reading singly.

The Great Mosque of Damascus.

But come down with me from the hill and take a stroll through the city. This is Sunday, and we shall first visit the mosques. There are seventy large ones, where sermons are preached every Friday, and 177 which might be called chapels, connected with which are Mohammedan schools. Many of these mosques have libraries and in all of them the chief study taught is theology, including the Koran and the traditions of the prophets. After that comes law, and then philosophy, logic and grammar. Modern sciences are unknown and all other branches of learning are entirely neglected.

The chief center of Moslem religious life is the Great mosque. This is one of the finest of Mohammedan churches. It stands right in the center of the city and it covers about seven acres, or almost twice as much space as the capitol at Washington. It has a great court paved with marble, in which is a fountain, said to mark the half-way station on the route from Constantinople to Mecca. It is there that worshippers bathe certain parts of their persons before going into their prayers. On the other side of this enormous court is the mosque proper, the oblong floor of which covers over an acre. Many great columns uphold its roof and other columns stand between it and the court.

In a Mohammedan Church.

Entering this room we find 2,000 men and perhaps 100 women at prayer. Nevertheless the building seems empty. The worshippers are scattered over the floor. The women are alone and the men dare not look at them. They are closely veiled and they do not notice us as we go by. Most of the men are on their knees or sitting upon the floor. All have removed their shoes before they came into the church and they now lie beside or in front of them. The floor is covered with costly rugs, the presents from devout Mohammedans. Think of roofing a large field, upholding the roof by mighty columns and then carpeting that field with oriental rugs, any one of which would be fit to hang upon your wall as a treasure, and you have some of the outlines of the picture which now lies before us.

There are strange things in the mosque. In its center is a marble chapel, supposed to stand over the ashes of John the Baptist. Men are sitting before the chapel, with their heads facing Mecca and they rise and fall as they pray to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, and to Mohammed as the prophet of God. It is thus that religion, like politics, makes strange bedfellows.

Heart of the Mohammedan World.

Damascus is the heart of the Mohammedan world. At its back is Persia, altogether Mohammedan. At its south Palestine and Arabia, which are more Moslem than Christian, while at the north are other realms of the sultan—Turkey in Asia and Europe. All around it the people are Mohammedans, who hate the Christians, and massacre them whenever they can. This was the case last spring, when thousands were killed and the most terrible slaughter of Christians by heathens known to the world took place in this region. Multitudes were massacred and it was only because the great Christian nations of Europe were afraid of their pocketbooks and of the loss of that balance of power which might result from a war that the Turkish empire was not wiped out as a punishment therefor. The matter was hushed up and but little of the true story was told in the papers. I refer to the bloodshed which took place throughout Asia Minor when the Sultan Abdul Hamid

was overthrown and the present sultan and government put in its place.

Another strange object in the Great mosque is the holy tent of the pilgrim caravan. This is used during the pilgrimage to Mecca, which generally starts at Damascus. This pilgrimage every Moslem is bound to take once in his life and the followers of the prophet come from all parts at a certain time of the year, and ride or march toward their holy city.

As they approach Mecca they take off their clothes, laying aside everything from the soles of their feet to the crowns of their heads. Then they put on aprons, and carrying only a piece of cloth over the left shoulder, walk into the city. They march around the Kaaba and kiss the black stone. They pelt Satan with rocks in the Valley of Mina and end their pilgrimage with a great sacrificial feast, at which time the end of Lent comes and the festival of Belram begins.

I have not seen these pilgrimages, but they are said to be interesting to an extreme. Many of the rich go on camel litters something like the mule litters used in north China. These are beds slung between poles which are fastened to camels, one going before and the other behind and trained to keep step. The camels are adorned with coins, shells and other ornaments for the occasion and hundreds of small bells jingle as they march. In advance of the procession is a large camel litter hung with green cloth and embroidered with gold. This contains the green flag of the prophet and one of the oldest copies of the Koran now in existence. In addition to the worshippers themselves the caravan has an escort of soldiers and Bedouins. There are also many half-naked dervishes, who sing and howl and cut themselves, shouting out texts from the Koran, as they go on their way.

Within the past few months the railroad which has been building from Damascus to Mecca has been almost completed and it is a question whether this will not cause this great caravan to become a thing of the past as far as the travel between Damascus and Mecca is concerned. A pilgrimage also starts out from Cairo and one of these not long ago was headed by the present khedive.

At Fatima's Tomb.

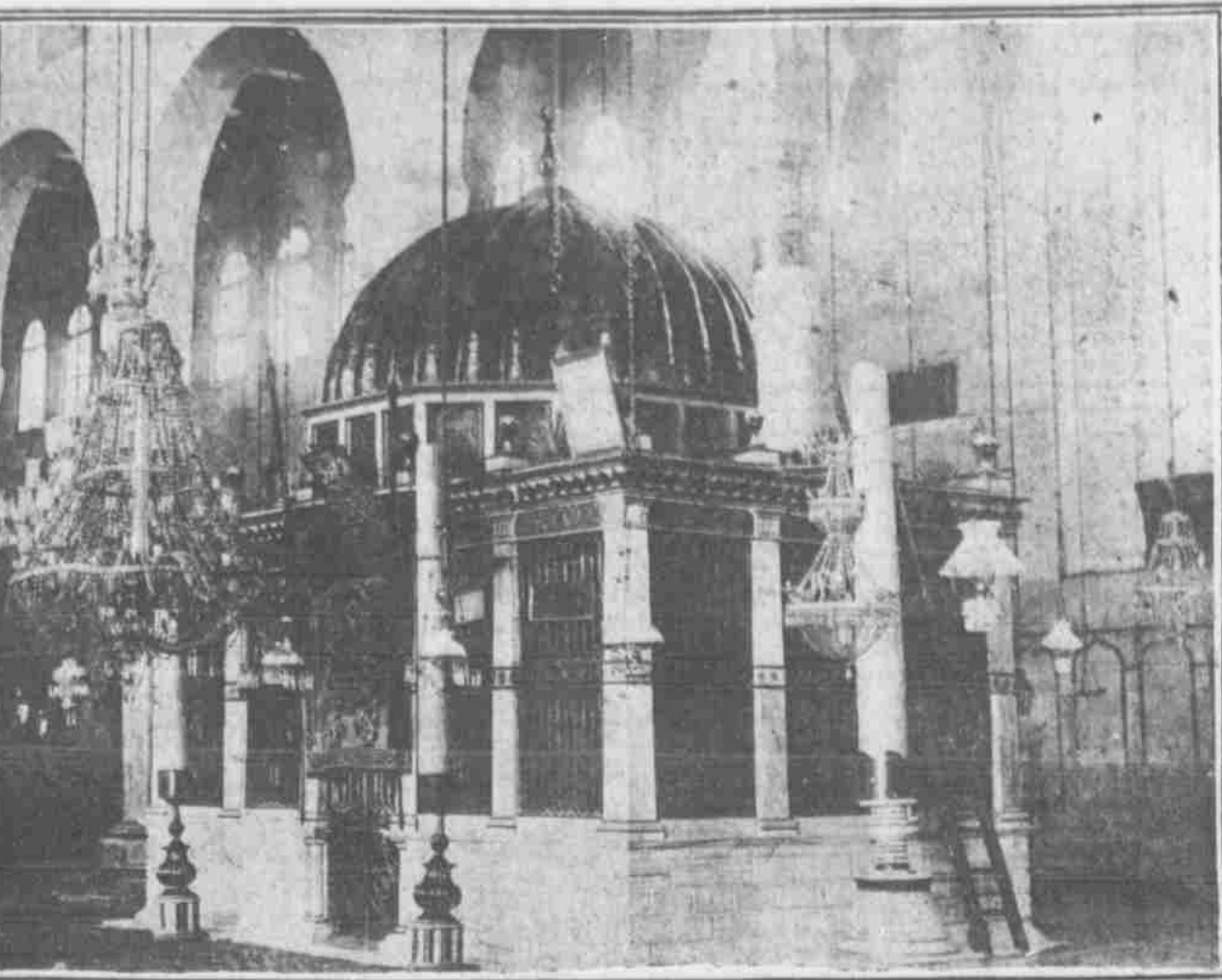
During my stay here I have gone out to the cemetery to take a look at the tomb of Mohammed's favorite daughter. As I remember it, Mohammed had several wives, in addition to the four which he allows to each of his followers. His first wife was Khadija, the widow whose fortune first made him prominent, and whose servant he was. As I remember it she was his first convert. Two of his other wives and Fatima are buried here, and Thursdays many veiled women come to mourn at their graves.

Railroad Men Want Profits

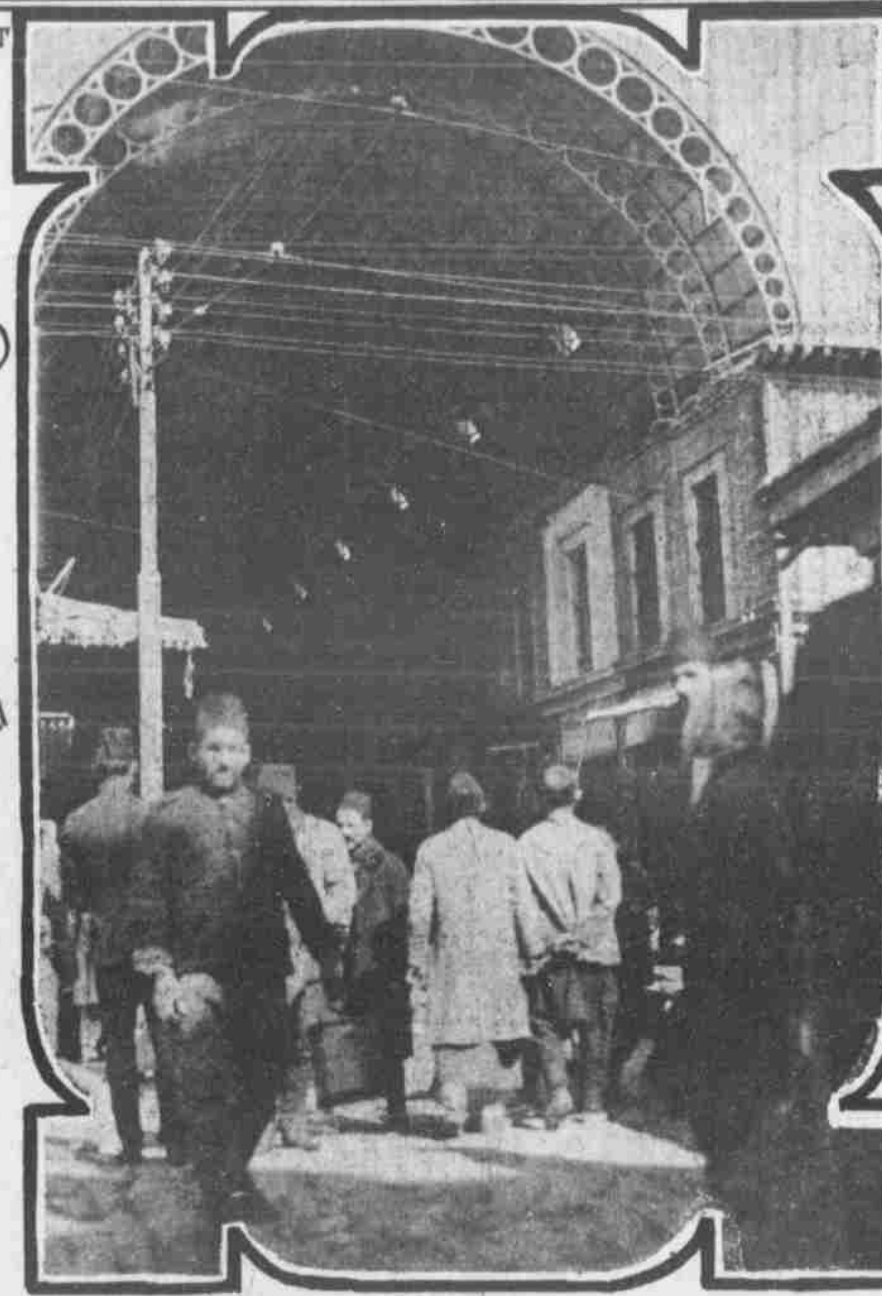
UAMES J. HILL'S profit-sharing plan is so popular that the Great Northern Employees' Investment company faces the problem of issuing more certificates or keeping many employees on the waiting list, according to the St. Paul Pioneer Press. From the fact that only about 180 shares of Great Northern stock are held in the treasury, covering some old Manitoba shares which cannot be obtained and converted, it seems the only way the demands of several hundred employees can be satisfied is by issuing additional capital stock. There is \$1,000,000 capital stock taken out by employees in investment certificates in this manner, to which another \$1,000,000 easily could be added, but whether it will be done or not rests with the board of directors of the Great Northern.

Six or seven years ago Mr. Hill devised a plan whereby employees could share in the prosperity of the road. Capital stock amounting to \$1,000,000 was taken out of the treasury and distributed as certificates by the investment company at \$10 a share and in multiples of ten, not to exceed \$5,000 for one employee.

The employees get these certificates at par and get 7 per cent dividend on them, just as if they held the



TOMB OF JOHN THE BAPTIST



IN THE "STREET CALLED STRAIGHT"

Fatima's tomb is a little domed mosque about fifteen feet square with a praying alcove facing toward Mecca. Fatima lies in a marble sarcophagus, which stands on a pedestal covered with green velvet and with a piece of green cloth at its head. As I looked at the tomb I saw several rags tied to the bars of the window and was told that they were put there as the pledges of sick persons showing that they would give money to the mosque if they should be cured.

The tomb of Saladin, the great Mohammedan general who fought Europe during the crusades, is also in Damascus. When the emperor of Germany came here he wished to lay a crown of gold on it, but this was contrary to the principle of the Mohammedan religion, which will not allow such things in their mosque. Therefore they built an alcove running from the mosque outside and it is there that this crown is now kept under glass doors.

In the Footsteps of St. Paul.

I have spent some time during my stay in Damascus in hunting up the footsteps of St. Paul, the apostle. You will remember that he was one of the Jewish officials, and was "breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" when he got the high priest to give him letters to the synagogues of Damascus, that he might bring such Christians as he found there to Jerusalem for trial. He was

on his way here and was not far from the city when the light from heaven shined round him and blinded him and the Lord said unto him:

"I am Jesus whom thou persecutest; it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks."

You remember how the blind Paul, or Saul, as he was then called, was led into Damascus and taken to the house of a man named Ananias, not the husband of Sapphira, however, nor any associate of the champion liar of history. You recall how when he came there he again received his sight and, being converted, was baptized. It was the house of this Ananias, according to my guide and the guide books, that I visited the other day. I found the Ananias of the present by no means averse to a small gift of silver. He took all my spare change, and then asked for more. I later discovered that the authenticity of the house is questioned, and there is another Ananias house, which is now used as a chapel. I looked for the house of Naaman the Syrian, and was shown an old building which is occupied by lepers.

In the Street Called Straight.

It was in the street called Straight that Ananias met Paul. This is one of the principal highways of the Damascus of today. It leads from the chief gate on the south to the basars, and is about the only straight street in the city. It goes right through Damascus, and is so wide that two or three carriages can pass within it. It is the center of traffic, and while there I saw caravans of camels, donkeys and horses bringing in and taking out all kinds of goods. One line of camels was loaded with poplar trees as long as a telegraph pole, the ends of which dragged the road as they walked. Behind them came donkeys with panniers of green cucumbers and horses loaded with baskets of Jaffa oranges, each as big as the head of a baby. I mean the oranges. A mule followed the horses. It was loaded with butter from the interior, the butter being packed in black leather bottles of the shape and size of a tin dinner bucket.

Where St. Paul Was Let Down in a Basket.

St. Paul had a lively time in Damascus. He preached in the synagogue and confounded the Jews. After a while the Jews took counsel to kill him, and they watched the gates day and night for that purpose. It was then that his friends took him by night and let him down over the wall in a basket. You may read about this in Acts IX, and in Corinthians II, 11. Paul himself states that the governor of the city sent a garrison to arrest him, and that it was through a window in the wall that he was let down in a basket and escaped.

This very place is now shown, and I have made a photograph of the spot. The wall is a great structure of stone, with a mud wall on top. There is a house on the top at the place indicated. This has windows with great bars across them, and it is very easy to imagine how St. Paul might have been let down from such a place when he made his escape.

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