

The Site of the Apostle Paul's Conversion at Kaukab



Otto F. Meinardus
Four traditional sites associated with the conversion and ministry of the Apostle Paul in and around the city of Damascus are singled out and commemorated: the "House of Judas," the "House of Ananias," the "Site of the Apostle's Escape," and the "Site of Paul's Conversion."

On the occasion of a recent tour to Damascus I had the opportunity to visit the various traditional sites associated with the conversion and ministry of the Apostle Paul in and around the city. Shortly after the Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, the Christian faith spread to Damascus. The Pharisee Saul, bearing his Roman name Paul of Tarsus, went there to stamp out the new messianic movement. Therefore, Damascus figures prominently in the New Testament in connection with the Apostle's ministry. Almost immediately after his conversion experience "near to Damascus" and his brief stay in the city, Paul left Damascus for Arabia where he spent three years. In his letter to the Galatians (1:17-18) he states that following this period of withdrawal he returned to Damascus to preach. At that time a governor appointed by the Nabatean king Aretas IV (3 B.C.-A.D. 40) ruled Damascus (2 Cor 11:32). In later centuries, the Christians of Damascus singled out four biblical sites for commemoration: The "House of Judas," the "House of Ananias," the "Site of the Apostle's Escape," and the "Site of Paul's Conversion."

The "House of Judas"

Today most visitors to Damascus are led through the ancient Roman *vicus rectus*, the "Street called Straight" (Acts 9:11) which now is a busy bazaar. On this street is the house of Judas where Paul prayed as Ananias turned to him and laid his hands

The Church of the Conversion of St. Paul.



The Church of St. Paul in the city walls at Damascus.

also destroyed and replaced by a mosque. The only remnant of the former church in the Roman wall is a single column standing now near the present shrine. In 1885, H. B. Gregory Joseph, the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Patriarch of Antioch, acquired the property and his successor, H. B. Cyril III, added the land outside the wall. In 1924 H. B. Demetrius Cadi laid the foundation stone of the new Sanctuary of St. Paul in the City Walls which was consecrated on the feast of the Apostles, 29 June 1941. Above the entrance to the church, which has the appearance of a city gate, is a stone window marking the site from which the Apostle is said to have escaped. Inside the gate-church, the Greek Catholic Patriarchate has maintained an orphanage for boys since 1964, administered by the Basilian Sisters of Aleppo.

About half a kilometer south of the Bâb Kisan, south of the Islamic cemetery, and within the boundaries of the Christian cemetery, the Christians commemorate the site where the Apostle sought refuge immediately after his escape.

The Site of Paul's Conversion

Paul referred a total of four times in his epistles to his conversion experience (Gal 1:15, 16; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; 2 Cor 4:6) while Luke has provided us with three accounts of the Apostle's vision on the Damascus Road, the so-called Antiochene source (Acts 9:1-19), Paul's speech to the crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 22:4-11) and the Apostle's defense before Agrippa (Acts 26:12-18). Only two accounts, however, refer to the site of the conversion, Acts 9:3 and 22:6, where it is merely stated that Paul had the experience "near to Damascus." Early and medieval traditions are not uniform as might be expected concerning the exact location of the site. A 6th-century tradition mentioned by Antoninus of Placentia (ca. 570) and repeated by Willibald, the 8th-century Bishop of Eichstätt, states that a monastery or a church is situated two miles from Damascus where Christ appeared to

on him. Throughout the Middle Ages a "House of Judas" was shown to the Christian pilgrims who traveled to the Holy Land. Early in the 17th century, the Italian nobleman Pietro della Valle described it as being "a little run down," and later (1673) Monsieur de Thévenot remarked that this house which is near the Bâb ash-Sharkî used to be a large church dedicated to St. Paul, but which the Turks had converted into a *khan* or caravansary. I was told that the traditional house of Judas had served for some time as a *madrassa*, an Islamic school.

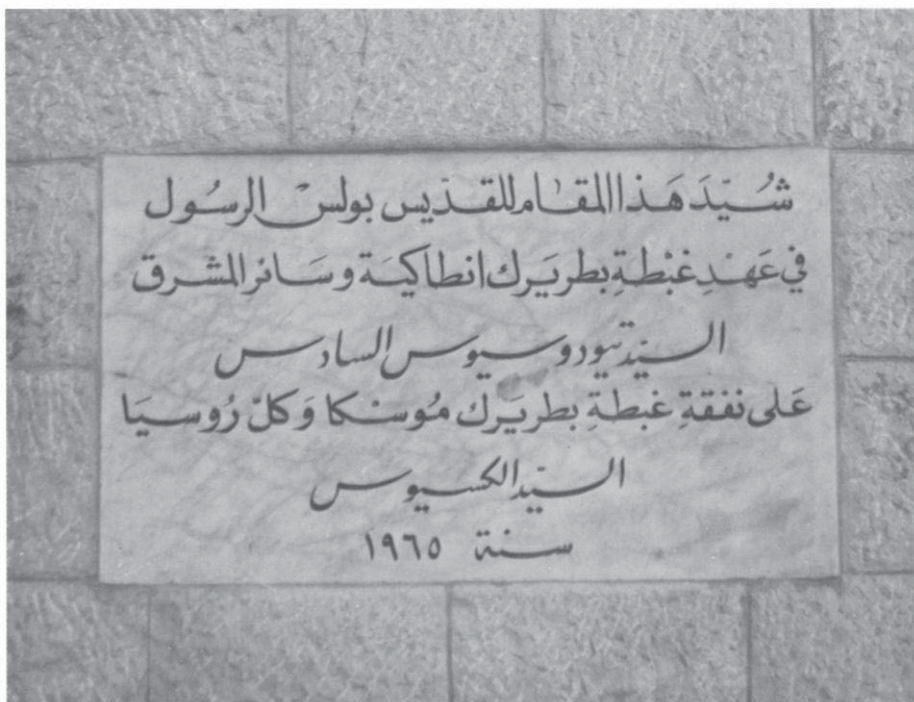
The House of Ananias

The subterranean church of St. Ananias is situated in a narrow lane connecting the Bâb ash-Sharkî with the Bâb Tûmâ and is traditionally associated with the house of Ananias. Here, the Jewish Christian Ananias of Damascus laid his hands on Paul, "and immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight . . . and he was baptized" (Acts 9:18). During the Middle Ages the building was used as a mosque, though by the 17th century the site had been acquired by the Latins. The pilgrims and travelers are unanimous in their accounts about the location of this chapel which was and still is served by the Franciscan

Friars of the Custody of the Holy Land. A flight of stairs leads down into the recently reconstructed underground chapel. Numerous votive offerings in the form of candles and *tammata* (small silver plaques showing certain ailing parts of the body) are placed in front of the icons and religious pictures adorning the room. The friar informed me that Catholic and Orthodox Christians as well as Muslims repair to this shrine for their supplications.

The Site of the Apostle's Escape

The site of the Apostle's escape, "where his disciples took him by night and let him down over the wall, lowering him in a basket" (Acts 9:25) is commemorated by a church built into the southern Roman wall at Bâb Kisan. A tradition held by the Christians of Damascus and mentioned already by the 17th- and 18th-century travelers Thévenot and Pococke states that the gate-keeper George, who was suspected for having assisted the Apostle in his escape, was subsequently stoned to death by the Jews. His tomb is found outside the walls near the Bâb Kisan. Like the Byzantine church built on the traditional site of the house of Ananias, the old church commemorating the Apostle's escape was



The dedicatory plaque at the Church of the Conversion of St. Paul.

Paul, while the 14th-century pilgrim Antony of Cremona reported that the site of the apparition of the risen Christ to the Apostle was merely one mile distant from Damascus. A late medieval tradition placed the site where Paul saw "the great light from heaven suddenly shining about him" about half a mile south of the Roman city walls in the vicinity of the Christian cemetery, between the tomb of George and the place of the Apostle's refuge. The fact that this site was not even on or near the old Roman road connecting Jerusalem with Damascus was already noticed by Richard Pococke when he visited Damascus in the first half of the 18th century.

Already during the Crusader period, however, another location of the conversion experience was visited by the pilgrims as reported by the knight of Arvieux and the travelers of the 17th century. While the archaeological remains pointing to a church are insignificant, there is an old local tradition that Paul experienced his conversion at the village of Kaukab, 15 km southwest of Damascus on the road to Jerusalem. In the area there are two sites which we must distinguish, namely, the hillock of Mâr Boulos (St. Paul) and the village of Kaukab,

situated on a slight elevation 1 km west of Mâr Boulos. Mâr Boulos is merely a small volcanic crater where a few archeological remains of a pre-Christian temple were discovered. Tradition has placed the site of Paul's conversion in the immediate neighborhood of the village of Kaukab, 30 or 40 m below the village and to the southwest near the open plain. At this spot, which is within an Islamic cemetery, there are several architectural remnants of a Byzantine church, namely, the base and a drum of a column and fragments of an architrave. Moreover, the villagers of Kaukab used to relate the story of the conversion of the Apostle Paul to pilgrims and travelers, and showed their visitors the incidental design in the cutting of a stoneblock in which they recognized a knight, who to them could only be St. Paul.

Whereas for centuries the tradition of St. Paul's conversion at the site was maintained by the villagers and a few travelers, today an impressive edifice commemorates the conversion of the Apostle. Leaving Damascus on the road to Quneitra, we turned to the left after ca. 16 km and saw situated on a slight elevation in the open fields a rotunda-church, which was enclosed on one side by a small court with several arches. An

unfinished road led to the building. After a while the custodian with the key appeared, warning us not to take any photographs because of nearby military installations. An Arabic inscription on a marble slab states that "This edifice was constructed in memory of the Holy Apostle Paul at the time of the Patriarchate of Theodosius VI of Antioch and All the East and was donated by the Patriarch Alexius of Moscow and All Russia in the year 1965." The interior of the church, covered with marble slabs, appeared unfinished. The beautiful altar in the center of the rotunda could still be seen since the altar-screen (*iconostasis*) had not yet been installed. The walls were adorned with several icons, the most impressive of which showed the Conversion of Paul.

Bibliography

- De Thévenot, J.
1673 *The Travels of Monsieur de Thévenot into the Levant*. 3 vols. London.
- Jalabert, L.
1921 "Damas." Cols. 129-33 in Vol. 4 of *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie chrétienne et de Liturgie*, ed. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq. Paris: Letouzey et Ané.
- Pococke, R.
1743-45 *A Description of the East and some other countries*. 2 vols. London: Printed for the author.
- Valle, P. della
1664 *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle il Pellegrino con minuto ragguaglio di tutte le cose notabili cosservate in esse*. Rome.