What Was the Decapolis?

By Roy E. Lucas, Jr.

MARK 5:20 RECORDS THE GERASENE demoniac's enthusiasm to share his experience with Jesus in the region of the Decapolis. Mark 7:31 presents Jesus' itinerary from the coastal area of Sidon across the northern end of the Sea of Galilee where He crossed into the

region of the Decapolis. The final biblical reference to the Decapolis is in Matthew 4:25, which states that people followed Jesus from Judea, Galilee, the Decapolis, and the areas on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Although these three passages mention the area of the Decapolis, they do so without naming one city in the region.

The Decapolis Cities

The word "Decapolis" means "ten cities." In the New Testament Era, the term "Decapolis" did not refer specifically to the ten cities themselves but referred to the general region in which they were located. The region, which was primarily east of the Jordan, was part of the Roman province of Syria and was bordered on the west by Perea, Samaria, and Galilee (see map, page 28).

Which ten cities originally made up the Decapolis? Early writers differed when listing which cities belonged in the Decapolis. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the elder (A.D. 23-79) listed: Damascus, Hippos, Canatha, Philadelphia, Pella, Scythopolis, Raphana, Dion

Left: Looking up Palladius Street in Beth-shan, which was called Scythopolis (meaning "city of the Scythians") when it served as the capital city of the Decapolis.

Excavations have shown occupation back to the Chalcolithic Era (4000 B.C.). In the New Testament Era, it was walled, had theaters, a hippodrome, and temples to various gods.

(Dium), Gadara, and Galasa (Gerasa).[1] Josephus mentioned the Decapolis and claimed that Scythopolis was the largest of the ten cities.[2] A later list, in Ptolemy's *Geography* (dated to second century A.D.), drops Raphana and adds nine others: Abida, Capitolias, Gadora, Ina, Samulis, Abila, Heliopolis, Saana, and Adra.[3]

With the exact make up of the Decapolis cities in question, historians have not been able to determine beyond a doubt the relationship between the cities. The three Gospel passages use terms suggesting the cities had a geographical association and not a formal alliance of any kind. Pliny used the word *regio*, which refers to a region, territory, or district— rather than *foedus* or *societas*, which denote a formal alliance.[4] Likewise, Josephus did not refer to an alliance between the cities when he mentioned the Decapolis. Instead, he wrote about how the Decapolis inhabitants complained to the Roman general Vespasian about the attacks of the Jews on their cities during the Jewish Revolt of the 60s.[5] Josephus's other references to the Decapolis offer no hint to any formal agreement between the cities.[6] Perhaps the cities held to some kind of loose confederacy?

The Historical Development

The Macedonians and Greeks under the leadership of Alexander
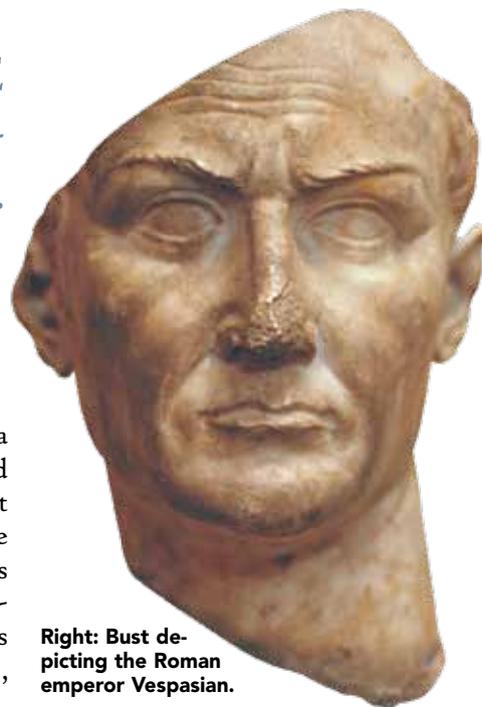
Right: Bust depicting the Roman emperor Vespasian.

the Great (ruled 356-323 B.C.) seized Asia Minor, Israel, and Egypt from the Persians between 334 and 331 B.C. Alexander then headed into Mesopotamia, decisively defeating the Persians under Darius III in 331. Alexander next moved to capture the major cities of the Persian Empire, including the capitals Babylon, Susa, and Persepolis. The Decapolis could not escape from Alexander's power and authority.[7]

Alexander knew he had to maintain control over the areas he conquered. His strategy affected all areas of life within the territory. He settled the disabled or wounded Greek soldiers within Hellenistic cities. Some of the cities already existed; others came to life by his command.

Two Decapolis cities that existed long before the Hellenistic period were Philadelphia and Scythopolis. Both cities, however, underwent significant changes under the influence of Alexander the Great and his successors, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. Gadara, Hippos, Gerasa (Jerash),

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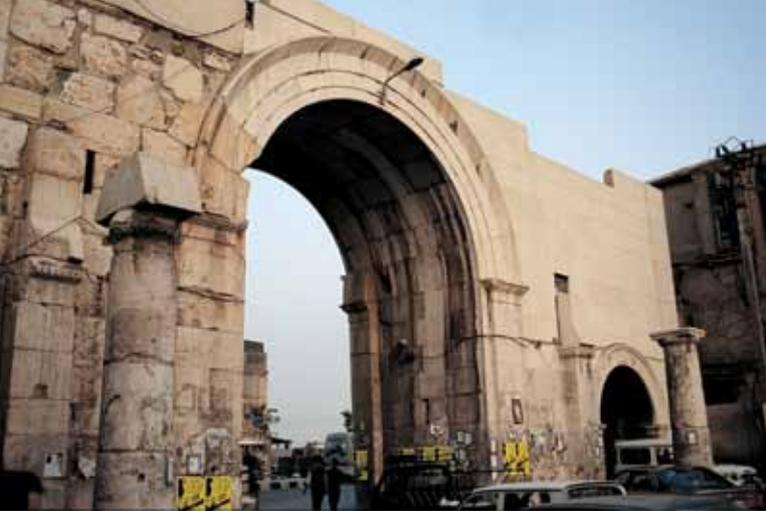
Above: The eastern gate of Damascus. The current capital of Syria, Damscus is one of the old- est cities in the world. In the New Testament Era, Damascus was the chief of the Decapolis cities.

Many Jews lived in Damscus in the first century; Saul was headed there when he was converted.

Above: Ruins at Abila, in modern northern Jordan; one of the Decapolis cities. Ruins at Abila date from the 8th cent. B.C. to the 8th cent. A.D. Archaeologists have uncovered three Byzantine churches at the site, leading some scholars to believe the city served as a bishopric headquarters.

Abila, Capitolias, and Dion also appeared prior to Alexander the Great, having been established during (or even before) the Persian period (586–332 B.C.). Regardless of the time that the cities came under Greek control, the populace soon embraced the Hellenistic way of life.

A Common History

The Decapolis cities had a shared history. Each experienced attacks by the Hasmonean (Maccabean) Kingdom from Jerusalem under Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 B.C.). The Roman general, Pompey, arrived in 63 B.C. and reestablished the Decapolis cities'

freedom as independent city-states. Each city encouraged a Hellenistic worldview. The cities' inhabitants spoke Greek; persons in the surrounding areas continued to speak mainly a combination of Aramaic and Hebrew while borrowing Greek terms. The citizens of the Decapolis imported the Greeks' gods and built temples dedicated to their deities: Artemis, Dionysus, Tyche, Zeus, and Heracles. Some in the area worshiped Astarte. These elements of Greek culture helped the new citizens to feel comfortable. The numerous theaters and public monuments give evidence of cultural activity. The *cardo maximus*, forums, and

theaters point to Roman cultural influences as well as Greek.[8]

Each of the cities followed the pattern of other Greco-Roman cities. They held annual elections for selecting a council. Each city wrote its own laws and then judged its citizens according to those laws. The cities organized schools to educate its youth, primarily males, physically and morally. The citizens held that the city was the central element around which life was organized, whether political, societal, philosophical, or economic.

A Purpose for the Decapolis

The Decapolis came into existence beginning with Alexander

Below: The theater at Gadara, a Decapolis city. The theater dates from the late Roman period.

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Left: Denarius with an image of General Pompey the Great; coin struck in Sicily, Catana. Pompey helped bolster the Decapolis as a region. He granted Decapolis citizens virtual autonomy in most matters.

Below: Hippos; some believe Jesus was in Hippos when He healed the deaf man (Mark 7:31-37).

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Above: Ruins of a Byzantine church in Amman, Jordan (1st cent. A.D. Philadelphia, a Decapolis city).

Above right: Ruins at Pella, which was one of the Decapolis cities. Archaeologists have excavated the hills on the right, unearthing Canaanite ruins dating to the 15th cent. B.C. During the first Jewish revolt before the destruction of Jerusalem, when the Roman army threatened the city (A.D. 66/67), many of the Christians of the Jerusalem church fled to Pella. Ruins of Byzantine buildings dominate the site, including the church in the lower center. The Jordan River is in the distance and Israel beyond.

(about 330 B.C.) but was refined with Pompey's arrival (63 B.C.). During the Greek and Roman periods, the primary aim of these cities appears to have been to serve mostly as defensive settlements. Whether under the rule of the Greek Ptolemies, Greek Seleucids, or the Romans, these fortified cities protected the trade routes from attacks by the Nabeteans or Bedouins.

The Decapolis cities' proximity to one another hints that some kind of association existed. The Hasmonean treatment under Alexander Jannaeus in the 80s B.C. demonstrated the need for unity. The Romans, under Pompey, unified this region in order to protect the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire. This action preserved the local Hellenistic culture from the sometimes-hostile Jewish and Semitic opponents.

Influence on the Jews

While the Decapolis served Greek and Roman defensive purposes primarily, how might this imported culture have affected the people of Israel? How vast was this influence by the end of the first century A.D.? In some areas of the Greco-Roman world, Hellenism and the local culture became so blended together that they were practically indistinguishable. The wide variety of evidence indicates that Hellenism reached into every area and aspect of Israel's life and culture. For example, Greek became one of the major languages of the world, and even the Jewish Scriptures needed translating from Hebrew into Greek for the Diaspora. Yet, "Hellenism was never aimed at the religious beliefs of conquered peoples. If anything it was…aimed at bringing an end to the exclusiveness of the Jews, only so that they would feel themselves free to be 'citizens of the world.'"9

Influence on Israel

Greek names occurring in all strata of Israelite society indicates the Greeks were making inroads into Hebrew culture, at least to some degree. Hellenism's impact

Below: A well-preserved Roman theatre at Beit Ras, outside of Amman, Jordan. Beit Ras is another name for Dion, which was also one of the Decapolis cities. The Romans built the city in the Ajlun Mountain Range and called the place "Capitolias" after their god Jupiter Capitolinus. Dion reached the height of its prosperity in the 2nd–3rd centuries A.D.

**Below: At Gerasa (modern Jerash),** oval plaza, which was built in the 1st cent. A.D. Located about 35 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee in Jordan, ancient Gerasa had numerous temples; the two largest ones were dedicated to Zeus and Artemis.

Cities of the
Decapolis

Damascus •

Raphana •

Sea of Galilee Hippos • Canatha •
• Abila
• Gadara

Scythopolis •
• •Dion
Pella
• Gerasa

Dead Sea

• Philadelphia
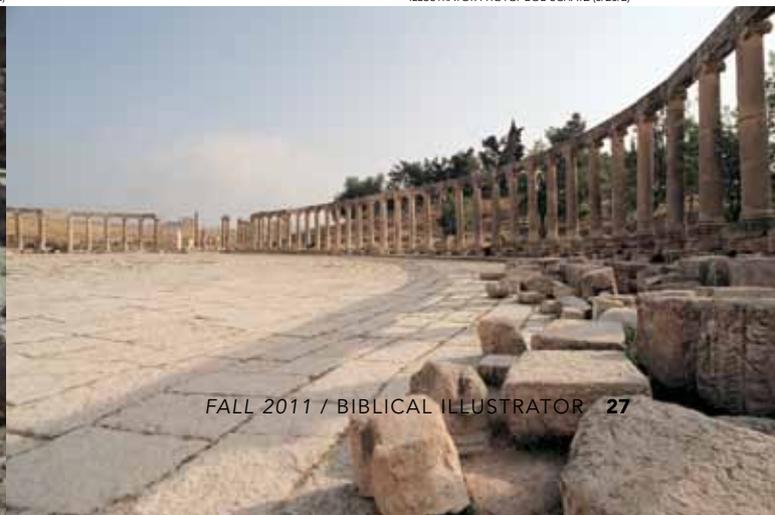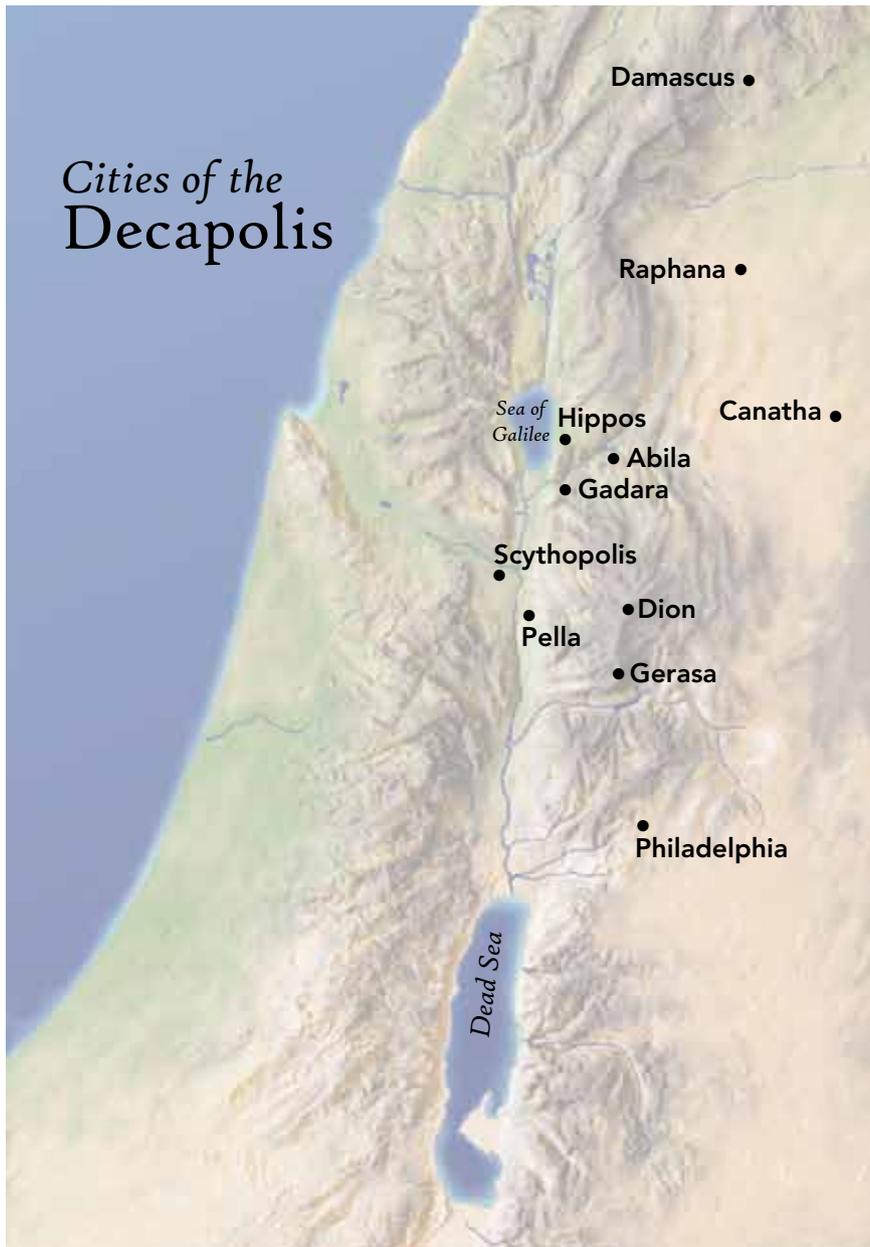
ILLUSTRATOR MAP/ LINDEN ARTISTS/ LONDON

brought with it more choices. The Greco-Roman cities offered options that the Jewish culture would not have experienced on a large scale. Literary production among the Jewish people increased during this intertestimental period. Greek objects, architecture, and decorative arts spread across the Jewish lands. However, the farther one traveled away from these cities, the less influence Hellenism exerted on the local populations.

While Greek did influence all areas of Israel at least to some degree, the Decapolis proved to be whole-heartedly committed to Hellenistic culture. Certain areas within the heart of Israel—such as Sepphoris and Jerusalem—assimilated in some manner, such as the use of Greek style in producing utensils (such as vases and pottery) and in architecture. Galilee did utilize elements of Greek culture, but only at a superficial level.

Galilee rejected most Hellenic thought, religion, and culture.[10] Little firm evidence exists to show that the masses of Israel accepted this Hellenistic culture to any major depth. Essentially the wealthy and commercial-minded citizens from the cities embraced this new culture; others did not.

The Demise of the Decapolis
In time, the Decapolis lost its importance, influence, and usefulness. The dismantling began in the first century A.D. Caesar Augustus presented Gadara and Hippos to Herod the Great in A.D. 30. Herod Agrippa II received Abila as part of his kingdom in A.D. 54. The cities of Dion, Philadelphia, and Gerasa became part of the province of Arabia, which Trajan established in A.D. 106. These readjustments gave evidence of changes in the regions around the Decapolis, to the cities' new loyalties, and to the resultant dissolution of their association. ℞

1. Pliny, *Natural History* Books 3-7, Loeb Classical Library, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1942), 5.16 (p. 277).
2. Josephus *Wars* 3.9.7.
3. Claudius Ptolemy, *The Geography,* trans. and ed. Edward Luther Stevenson (New York: Dover, 1991), 5.14 (p. 127).
4. S. Thomas Parker, "The Decapolis Reviewed," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94.3 (September 1975): 438.
5. Josephus, *Life*, 65, 74.
6. Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 362.
7. Iain Browning, *Jerash and the Decapolis* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), 12-13; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 458.
8. B. VanElderen, "New Testament Geography" in *The World of the Bible*, vol. 1, *Bible Handbook*, gen. ed. A. S. Van Der Woude (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 44.
9. Browning, 22.
10. Louis H. Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2006), 89-90.

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