

The Flight to Pella

"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies... Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it; for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written."

(Luke 21:20-22 RSV)

Josephus: Escapes from Jerusalem AD 66-70

- **Circa November 66AD**

Jewish War 2:20:1

After this calamity had befallen Cestius, *many of the most eminent of the Jews swam away from the city...*

- **Circa Winter 67AD/68AD before Passover**

Jewish War 4:6:1

The Idumeans complied with these persuasions; and, in the first place, they set those that were in the prisons at liberty, being about *two thousand of the populace, who thereupon fled away immediately to Simon*

Jewish War : 4:7:3

These things were told Vespasian by deserters; for although the seditious watched all the passages out of the city, and destroyed all, whosoever they were, that came thither, *yet were there some that had concealed themselves, and when they had fled to the Romans, ... Vespasian did indeed already pity the calamities these men were in...*

- **Circa June 70AD**

Jewish War 5:10:1

As Josephus was speaking thus with a loud voice, the seditious would neither yield to what he said, nor did they deem it safe for them to alter their conduct; but as for the people, they had a great inclination to desert to the Romans; accordingly, some of them sold what they had, and even the most precious things that had been laid up as treasures by them, for every small matter, and swallowed down pieces of gold, that they might not be found out by the robbers; and *when they had escaped to the Romans, went to stool, and had wherewithal to provide plentifully for themselves; for Titus let a great number of them go away into the country, whither they pleased.*

Jewish War 5:13:4

Hereupon some of the deserters, having no other way, leaped down from the wall immediately, while *others of them went out of the city with stones, as if they would fight them; but thereupon they fled away to the Romans.* But here a worse fate accompanied these than what they had found within the city; and they met with a quicker dispatch from the too great abundance they had among the Romans, than they could have done from the famine among the Jews; for when they came first to the Romans, they were puffed up by the famine, and swelled like men in a dropsy; after which they all on the sudden overfilled those bodies that were before empty, and so burst asunder, *excepting such only as were skilful enough to restrain their appetites, and by degrees took in their food into bodies unaccustomed thereto.*

- **Circa August 70AD**

Jewish War 6:2:2

As Josephus spoke these words, with groans and tears in his eyes, his voice was intercepted by sobs. However, the Romans could not but pity the affliction he was under, and wonder at his conduct. But for John, and those that were with him, they were but the more exasperated against the Romans on this account, and were desirous to get Josephus also into their power: yet did that discourse influence a great many of the better sort; and truly some of them were so afraid of the guards set by the seditious, that they tarried where they were, but still were satisfied that both they and the city were doomed to destruction. *Some also there were who, watching a proper opportunity when they might quietly get away, fled to the Romans, of whom were the high priests Joseph and Jesus, and of the sons of high priests three, whose father was Ishmael, who was beheaded in Cyrene, and four sons of Matthias, as also one son of the other Matthias, who ran away after his father's death, and whose father was slain by Simon the son of Gioras, with three of his sons, as I have already related; many also of the other nobility went over to the Romans, together with the high priests.*

Pseudo-Clementines (2/3rd Century AD)

"Subsequently also an evident proof of this great mystery is supplied in the fact, that every one who, believing in this Prophet who had been foretold by Moses, is baptized in His name, shall be kept unhurt from the destruction of war which impends over the unbelieving nation, and the place itself; but that those who do not believe shall be made exiles from their place and kingdom, that even against their will they may understand and obey the will of God." (Recognitions 1:39:3)

Eusebius (325AD)

"But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approved men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella." (History of the Church 3:5:3)

"The whole body, however, of the church at Jerusalem, having been commanded by a divine revelation, given to men of approved piety there before the war, removed from the city, and dwelt at a certain town beyond the Jordan, called Pella. Here those that believed in Christ, having removed from Jerusalem, as if holy men had entirely abandoned the royal city itself, and the whole land of Judea; the divine justice, for their crimes against Christ and his apostles finally overtook them, totally destroying the whole generation of these evildoers from the earth. (Eusebius, 3:5.)

"After all those who believed in Christ had generally come to live in Perea, in a city called Pella of the Decapolis of which it is written in the Gospel and which is situated in the neighborhood of the region of Batanaea and Basanitis, Ebion's preaching originated here after they had moved to this place and had lived there." (*Panarion* 30:2)

"For when the city was about to be captured and sacked by the Romans, all the disciples were warned beforehand by an angel to remove from the city, doomed as it was to utter destruction. On migrating from it they settled at Pella, the town already indicated, across the Jordan. It is said to belong to Decapolis (*de Mens. et Pond.*, 15).

"Now this sect of Nazarenes exists in Beroea in Coele-Syria, and in Decapolis in the district of Pella, and in Kochaba of Basanitis-- called Kohoraba in Hebrew. For thence it originated after the migration from Jerusalem of all the disciples who resided at Pella, Christ having instructed them to leave Jerusalem and retire from it on account of the impending siege. It was owing to this counsel that they went away, as I have said, to reside for a while at Pella" (*Haer* 29:7).

"For when all who believed in Christ had settled down about that time in Perea, the majority of the emigrants taking up their abode at Pella, a town belonging to the Decapolis mentioned in the Gospel, near Batanea and the district to Basanitis, Ebion got his excuse and opportunity. At first their abode was Kochaba, a village in the district of Carnaim, Arnem, and Astaroth, in the region of Basanitis, according to the information we have received. But I have spoken, in other connections and with regard to other heresies, of the locality of Kochaba and Arabia (*Haer* 30:2)... "[The Ebionites] spring for the most part from Batanea ... and Paneas, as well as from Moabitis and Cochaba in Basanitis on the other side of Adraa" (*Haer* 30:18).

Epiphanius (375AD)

"The Nazoraean sect exists in Beroea near Coele Syria, in the Decapolis near the region of Pella, and in Bashan in the place called Cocaba, which in Hebrew is called Chochabe. That is where the sect began, when all the disciples were living in Pella after they moved from Jerusalem, since Christ told them to leave Jerusalem and withdraw because it was about to be besieged. For this reason they settled in Perea and there, as I said, they lived. This is where the Nazoraean sect began." (*Panarion* 29:7:7-8)

"Their sect began after the capture of Jerusalem. For when all those who believed in Christ settled at that time for the most part in Perea, in a city called Pella belonging to the Decapolis mentioned in the gospel, which is next to Batanaea and the land of Bashan, then they moved there and stayed.." (*Panarion* 30:2:7)

"For when the city was about to be captured and sacked by the Romans, all the disciples were warned beforehand by an angel to remove from the city, doomed as it was to utter destruction. On migrating from it they settled at Pella, the town already indicated, across the Jordan. It is said to belong to Decapolis" (On Weights and Measures 15)

Flavius Josephus (75AD)

(Opportunity Arises to Flee) "It then happened that Cestius was not conscious either how the besieged despaired of success, nor how courageous the people were for him; and so he recalled his soldiers from the place, and by despairing of any expectation of taking it, without having received any disgrace, he retired from the city, without any reason in the world." (Wars, II, XIX, 6, 7)

Commentaries

C.H. Spurgeon

"The Christians in Jerusalem and the surrounding towns and villages, "in Judea ", availed themselves of the first opportunity for eluding the Roman armies, and fled to the mountain city of Pella, in Perea, where they were preserved from the general destruction which overthrew the Jews. There was no time to spare before the final investment of the guilty city; the man "on the house-top" could "not come down to take anything out of his house", and the man "in the field" could not "return back, to take his clothes." They must flee to the mountains in the greatest haste the moment that they saw "Jerusalem compassed with armies "(Luke 21:20)."

Charles Finney (1852)

"From the connection of this passage, some have inferred that the apostle had his eye immediately upon the destruction of Jerusalem. They suppose this great and fearful event to be alluded to in the language, "For the time has come that judgment must begin at the house of God; and if it first begin at us, what shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God?" This may refer to the destruction of the city and temple of God's ancient people, yet the evidence for the opinion does not seem to be decisive. A reference to the event is possible and even probable. We know that when Jerusalem was destroyed, not one Christian perished. They had timely notice in the signs Christ had already given them, and perceiving those signs in season, they all fled to Pella, on the east of the Jordan, and hence were not involved in the general destruction."

Pella of the Decapolis

A mountain refuge for the first century church.



Looking down at ruins of Pella: note the church ruins in valley and older ruins on upper right hill



A panorama of Pella, showing about 120 degrees, taken 3 years after the photo above it. Though sunny, a sandstorm greatly limited visibility on the horizon.

There was enough population by 218 B.C. to note that the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III overran Pella as well as laying siege to Gadara, having come across the Jordan. Following this, early in the second century B.C., Pella experienced substantial growth. In this period it adopted Hellenistic culture, a key feature of all the Decapolis cities, and Hellenized its name to Pella (possible in honour of Alexander The Great's birthplace).

The Roman general Pompey later capture the region in 63 B.C., and was heralded as a liberator by many of the Hellenized cities and towns, setting them free from the rule of the Hasmonean ruler Alexander Jannaeus. It is as a Roman Decapolis city that Pella is indirectly mentioned, in the gospels, in association with the ministry of Jesus.

Christianity came early to this city and its primary claim to fame, for Christians, is that it served as a place of refuge for believers who fled the coming siege and destruction of Jerusalem in the first century (circa 67AD), during the Great Jewish Revolt that led to the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. The early church understood Jesus' words in Luke 21 as pertaining to their day, not a far future end times event at Jesus' physical return.

As the Christians foresaw the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the desecration of the temple, first of all by the Jewish factions in Jerusalem, which was completed by the Romans under Titus, they fled. The mountains of Gilead, near the northern edge of the region of Perea, is where Pella is located, making it a fitting destination for the call to "flee to the mountains."

The region around Jerusalem, in the hill country of Judea, had many possible "mountain" refuges, but a destination outside of Judea was selected. The route to which was northward through the Jordan valley. The church historian Eusebius, writing in 325 A.D., states that their destination was "commanded by a revelation", giving credit to God for providing the time of necessary departure and their destination. Through this God spared all believers in Jerusalem from the judgment which was about to befall it.

One commentary even notes that the circumstances, which allowed for the Christians to flee, were both extraordinary and necessary:

Accordingly, Cestus Gallus, when advancing on Jerusalem, unaccountably withdrew for a brief space, giving Christians the opportunity of obeying Christ's words by fleeing to Pella. (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary, article on Zechariah 11:11)

Unfortunately the flight of the Christians was viewed as a sign of disloyalty by the other Jews in the region: It is also understood that this act of foresight based on the Messiah's own warning and instruction was taken by the non-Messianic Jews as an act of disloyalty to the nation in time of war, and it became a major cause for resenting Jewish believers and taking sanctions against them. (Jewish New Testament Commentary Copyright © 1992 by David H. Stern Article on Luke 21:20-23)

Much of the city was destroyed in A.D. 749 by earthquake and the area fell into relative obscurity, inhabited only as a small village. Only a small portion of the ruins of Pella have been excavated, beginning in 1979, with more being planned.

Possible Escape Route:

