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Petra: Strangest
City on the Earth

By Wilmer C. Fields
Director, Baptist Press

Three hours south of Amman by automobile and 20 centuries removed from most of the rest of the world are the spectacular remains of the original rock city, Petra.

Carved by a departed race from great red mountains in the Arabian desert, Petra was lost to civilization for centuries. Rediscovered in 1812, the place is one of the most startling wonders ever wrought by nature and man.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has dozens of sites mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. They are beginning to be popular with travelers who are re-discovering the East Bank. Petra's improbable mausoleums, obelisks and far-fetched habitations are the number one such attraction in "the land beyond the River Jordan."

Sela, the biblical name for the place (mentioned in II Kings, Isaiah, Judges, Jeremiah, and Obadiah), like the name Petra, means "rock."

Beginning with the Edomites, who lived in the area when Moses and the migrating Israelites passed through around 1400 B.C., successive generations began carving living space in the soft sandstone. Excavations for temples and royal tombs gradually became more elaborate.

Sitting on my desk is a treasured lamp made of astonishingly thin, hard clay by the Nabataeans, an early Arab people who made Petra their fortress and capital. For five hundred years, from the third century B.C. to the second century A.D., these fierce desert people harried the land from Gaza to Damascus.

The Nabataeans prospered, controlling the trade routes for camel caravans moving between Egypt and the East. Their art, architecture and primitive engineering are still wonders to behold.

The Nabataeans were shrewd ecologists, good water conservationists, and for their time they were masters at urban planning. They chiseled buildings of heroic proportions and monuments of breath-taking grandeur from the purple, blue, mauve, red, and amber sandstone peaks.

The brilliant colors of these long-abandoned edifices, "hues of youth upon a brow of woe," are still marvels of nature, "as if the blush of the dawn that first beheld them were not yet withdrawn."

An early explorer of the area, Dean Burgon, who wrote those memorable lines, also gave this singular place its most eloquent description: "A rose-red city, half as old as Time."

Five Baptist editors and I rode Arabian horses through "The Siq," the narrow, mile-long gorge which forms the entrance to the ancient city. Sheer mountain walls rise to 300 feet on either side of a twisting path only six to twenty feet wide. The deep cleft forms a gauntlet that is slender as a thread, a deathtrap for invaders and the unwelcome. Small wonder that a handful of defenders could hold off an army of archers and swordsmen.

From the perpetual twilight of this entrance ravine, the visitor turns a corner suddenly to enter a sunlit open space and face a magnificent temple of huge columns, cornices and statuary carved with infinite patience from the side of a cliff. "The Treasury" is the largest among hundreds of public structures and private dwellings cut into the rock throughout the area.

The mountaintops of Petra, up to 4,000 feet in elevation, were places of pagan worship where temples and altars were sculpted from the living stone. The largest of these is

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"The Monastery" which commands a view through the shimmering heat toward the Red Sea and the Sinai Desert.

Persians, Greeks and Romans left their marks on the entire Middle East, including Petra. Roman public works, especially, including a 2,000-seat amphitheater, added to the awesome remains of this mountain oasis helping to make it the strangest city on earth.

Great drama moved through these mountain passes. In 797 B.C. Amaziah, King of Judah, seized the area (II Kings 14:7) and executed his opponents by throwing them off a mountain-top. In 312 B.C. Antigonus captured Petra but was waylaid by the wily Nabataeans and his army destroyed.

A series of Nabataean rulers named Aretas spread Petra's power on both sides of the Jordan River. One of them refused protection to Jason when he fled Jerusalem. Another lost some territory east of the Jordan to the Jewish king, Alexander Jannaeus. They were ruling during the time of Jesus. Herod the Great, an Idumaeen, came from territory they occupied in Southern Judea. A governor appointed by Aretas IV tried to arrest Paul in Damascus (II Corinthians 2:32).

Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, married a daughter of Aretas IV and divorced her to marry Herodias, the lady of delicate sensibilities who had John the Baptist beheaded. John was imprisoned and executed at Machaerus, another mountain fortress north of Petra and east of the Dead Sea.

When the Jews revolted against the Romans in 65-70 A.D. in a war that abolished the State of Israel for 1,878 years (until 1948), one of the Nabataean kings, Malichus II, sent from his capital at Petra 1,000 horses and 6,000 men to fight beside the Roman general (and later Emperor) Vespasian.

When the camel caravan routes changed (by 200 A.D.), Petra began its long decline. Christianity came to the then ancient city late, around 450 A.D. Some of its pagan temples were turned into churches and some Christian symbols are still visible. By the time of the Arab conquests of Mohammed and his successors in the seventh century, Petra was of little consequence.

Crusaders built a fortress in the area in the twelfth century, but Petra continued to sink into obscurity. Eventually its very existence was forgotten during a time and in a place that was, to use Oliver Goldsmith's phrase, "remote, unfriendly, melancholy, and slow."

Today the rose-red city of Petra attracts growing crowds of tourists and pilgrims, particularly from the U.S.A. Christians in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan are among the most eager and knowledgeable students of the region's past. These include the Southern Baptist representatives who began their service with the Baptist congregations there in 1952 and now number around thirty workers. They seek to interpret for modern Jordanians the significance of the Christian gospel for all of the tomorrows. They also are finding some spiritual roots around some fascinating sites that are "half as old as Time." (BP)

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(BP) Illustration mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Baptist Press.

Baptist Hospital Helps To Search Disease Clue

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (BP)--Baptist Memorial Hospital is cooperating with health officials to determine what caused seven cases of Legionnaires' Disease in Memphis, according to Charles Baker, hospital vice president.

Officials of the Memphis and Shelby County Health Departments and the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, are using Baptist Hospital laboratories to diagnose the disease.

The only death connected with the mysterious disease was the husband of a Baptist Hospital employee. "We are waiting for the autopsy report to determine the actual cause of death," Baker said, adding that Legionnaires' Disease was just one of several medical problems he had.

Three of the confirmed cases were from among the 5,000 hospital employees, but all have fully recovered. The other three confirmed cases apparently had no direct connection with the nation's largest private hospital, according to Baker.

Baker said there has been no evidence of panic among the patients or employees. "There's no problem with employees being hesitant to come to work or to care for any patient," he said, noting that occupancy in the 1,865-bed hospital was running higher in September than the previous month.

Legionnaires' Disease is a respiratory ailment. Health officials have noted an increase in pneumonia cases in Memphis from mid-August to early September. Those diagnosed as having Legionnaires' Disease thus far became ill in mid to late August.

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Texas Baptist Oppose
Government Intrusion

By Orville Scott

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DALLAS (BP)--Texas Baptists' executive board has rapped government interference in "free exercise" of religion, warning that acceptance of government funds by Texas Baptist institutions "could ultimately jeopardize the uniqueness of their Christian ministries."

The 192-member board, which established firm new guidelines for church state relationships, approved a report from a study committee appointed in 1976 to determine the extent of government intrusion into Baptist affairs in Texas.

"We're not as nice and clean and sweet about these matters as we'd like to be," said the chairman of the study committee, Lester Collins, pastor of the Tallowood Baptist Church, Houston. "For example, we receive tuition equalization grants for our colleges but oppose it for all grade schools," Collins said.

The board will recommend to the convention, at its annual meeting in Austin, Texas, Oct. 31-Nov. 2, that it reaffirm the importance of its institutions as an integral part of its mission and "declare its opposition to the growing tendency of government agencies to impose restrictions that adversely affect the ability of the institutions to fulfill their distinctive purposes as Christian institutions."

Such interference is typified, said Collins, by a recent Department of Health, Education, and Welfare position paper to educational institutions suggesting that homosexuals and drug addicts be reclassified as handicapped people.

"The genius of the Baptist witness," Collins said, "has been the ability to offer a clear alternative to the mood and lifestyle of the secular societies in which it has existed."

The report recognizes that the government has the right to set standards for the health, safety and welfare of its citizens. But it said the problems arise when specific state regulations or the total burden or regulations becomes so onerous that it is difficult or impossible for the institution to function effectively.

"Controls have increased markedly in recent years, the statement said. "Many of these controls are unrelated to government funding."

The board also recommended that the convention urge all churches which operate elementary or secondary schools to reject all government aid for the schools.

Other church-state recommendations cited the danger of dependence on government support, asked institutions to avoid contracts to perform services for the government when reimbursement is greater than the cost of rendering these services, and recommended that institutions not accept government aid which might restrict their control of personnel policies "consistent with our Christian purposes."

"There is not only responsibility to see that the taxpayers' money is not used for sectarian purposes but there is also responsibility to see that our institutions, in purpose and function, stay distinctly separate from the state," the statement said.

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Hollis, Parker Oppose
Communications Act Rewrite

WASHINGTON, D.C. (BP)--Two denominational executives charged in testimony before a congressional subcommittee that the proposed rewrite of the federal Communications Act of 1934 would damage the public interest.

Harry N. Hollis Jr., associate executive secretary of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, and Everett C. Parker, director of the United Church of Christ's office of communication, called for a major overhaul of H. R. 1305, "The Communications Act of 1978."

U. S. Rep. Lionel Van Deerlin, D.-Cal., chairman of the House Subcommittee on Communications, acknowledged that the embattled bill will have to be redrawn. He said that a new version will be introduced in the new Congress in January and that he would welcome additional testimony from the witnesses.

The present bill has also been attacked by such corporate giants as American Telephone and Telegraph and Bell Telephone Co., as well as cable television interests.

Hollis said the current proposal would allow "the rape of the public interest" by catering chiefly to the economic interests of the television and radio industries. The bill would eliminate the so-called "public interest standard" of the present communications act which requires broadcasters to operate in "the public interest, convenience and necessity."

Generally, it would provide for a complete deregulation of the radio industry and substantial deregulation of television broadcasting. Under the bill's provisions, the present Federal Communications Commission would be replaced by a more limited Communications Regulatory Commission.

Hollis, who has helped engineer a nationwide, two-year "Help for Television Viewers" project for Southern Baptists, said his social concerns agency has encountered millions of Americans who are "anguished and angry about the fact that the television industry has so often ignored its trusteeship of the airwaves." Deregulating the industry, he said, would only serve to heighten the influence of a medium that is already too powerful.

Van Deerlin challenged Hollis to come up with positive suggestions for the subcommittee rather than offering only negative observations. Hollis countered by saying that changing the rules just at the time when public interest groups are beginning to have some effect on broadcasters would undercut efforts to improve broadcasting.

Parker, supporting Hollis' point of view, said, "In stripping away all requirements for licensees to account for how they serve the public, the bill grants television, radio and other telecommunications monopolies the right to determine, unilaterally what political, economic, cultural and educational ideas shall be disseminated to the American public.

"The American people are not just a hapless audience to be delivered by the Congress to advertisers, broadcasters and common carriers for their enrichment," Parker continued. "We're not merely consumers of goods and services provided to us. The people govern. They're entitled to make their opinions known and to have their wishes followed. This bill ignores that fact," Parker charged.

Parker also expressed "acute distress" at provisions of the proposed bill that would wipe out current fair employment practices rules of the FCC that require broadcasters and cable operators to hire, train and upgrade minorities and women.

