

Is There a “Place of Safety” for the Church—Part Four

Will the church of God be taken to a specific place of safety during the troubling times that are prophesied to come upon this world before the return of the Christ?

Much effort has been made to cite biblical passages that are believed to support the doctrine of a “place of safety,” while at the same time there is an open admission of uncertainty that such a place will exist for the church in the future.

The irony of this approach is also apparent in the claim that a well-known tourist location in Jordan will most likely be that safe place, even though it is hoped this desolate area in the Middle East will not be the “place of safety” for the church of God.

Bringing us then to examine how the belief in a place of safety in a wilderness became associated with the former territory of ancient Edom, and in particular with the former strong-hold and current archaeological city of Petra in the country of Jordan today.

Now, to understand how the doctrine of a place of safety became associated with the ruins of Petra we begin by considering some historical accounts of events that took place before the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70.

Of first interest is the historical compilations of the writer and historian Eusebius Pamphili, who in the time of the Roman emperor Diocletian finished an edition of his voluminous work known as the *Ecclesiastical History*. In this standardized church history Eusebius wrote that: “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. And when those

that believed in Christ had come there from Jerusalem, then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles, and totally destroyed that generation of impious men" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk. 3, Chp. 5).

Notably, Pella was a city named after Alexander the Great's birthplace, and was considered to be one of the cities of the Decapolis and an extension of Greek and Roman culture into the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. In AD 66, according to the historian Flavius Josephus this city and Roman garrison was sacked by Jewish revolutionaries, and this action in part initiated a fateful Roman intervention in the region that eventually brought about the overthrow of the city of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Consequently, with this historical backdrop in mind, there have been a few attempts to associate the three and one-half years of John's prophecy with the events of the First Jewish-Roman War (also called the "Great Revolt"). But given what we know of the history of this period, and of John's prophecy, we would have to admit that we don't find any biblical or historical evidence that allows us to apply these three and one-half years to the Roman intervention in the province of Judea.

Of second interest are the writings of the historian and former military commander Flavius Josephus who wrote about some rather unusual events that took place in and around Jerusalem before and during the war, and he stated that on the Day of Pentecost in AD 69: "as the priests were going by night into the inner [court of the temple], as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, 'Let us remove hence'" (*Wars of the Jews*, Josephus,

Bk. 6, Chp. 5, Sec. 3).

Consequently, we find that as a result of the writings of Eusebius and Josephus—among others—there has been an acceptance of these historical accounts as being valid records of what happened to the church at Jerusalem from AD 66 to AD 70.

That is to say it is believed by some that the church at Jerusalem was spared the Roman siege by fleeing to the then former Roman outpost of Pella.

Considering it to be at that time a place of safety for the church of God.

However, the works of Eusebius are not without challenge, and what Josephus wrote concerning a “voice” that was heard at the temple cannot be accepted as verifiable or reliable, and we have no biblical reason to believe these historical accounts should bring any direct credibility to Scripture.

This, of course, does not mean Eusebius was not being careful about what he wrote while compiling his church history, or that Josephus was not conveying the stories forward with some accuracy, but it is unwise to accept these stories as true regarding the church at Jerusalem. Just as we should not grant truthfulness to Josephus’ account of a heifer giving birth to a lamb, or to the account of “chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor” being seen “running about among the clouds” at some time before the destruction of Jerusalem. Which leads us to say these are indeed interesting stories, but there is no evidence that allows us to conclude these stories are in actuality true, particularly in regard to the church being warned by a “voice” to flee Jerusalem. (Josephus did not say the leadership of the church heard a voice at the temple.)

Bringing us then to consider the warnings given by Jesus. Because we must consider that Jesus did not tell any of his

disciples to be listening for a “voice,” and therefore if they had heard a voice, then they could not have been certain that it was from God (Mt. 24:1-2).

Also, we cannot overlook the significance of church history from the biblical perspective, noting that there was a dispersion of the church that was caused by the Apostle Paul himself (then Saul), who scattered members of the church before he was struck blind on his way to Damascus. Showing that the “church” had already spread beyond Jerusalem some years before the Roman intervention, and on top of this we have the biblical record of Paul and the other apostles raising up congregations from Judea to Babylon and westward to Asia before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70—which included the church that was at Rome (Rom. 1:7).

Meaning that many church congregations were already in existence within the realm of the Roman Empire before the destruction of Jerusalem. This would mean that we cannot use the historical accounts regarding Pella to isolate and reduce the Roman intervention in Judea to be solely an aggression upon the church of God.

Now, some churches and denominations have put forward the teaching that “Petra,” the former merchant city of the Nabataeans, is the likely candidate for being the place of safety for the church in the future.

The foundation for this belief comes from the melding of the cultivated interpretations of John’s vision with similar cultivated interpretations imposed upon the writings of the prophets of Israel and Judah. This is initially done by using an interpretive methodology to transfer those terms that apply to God the Father and Jesus the Christ, and give them direct applicability to the biblical place-name of Sela, also called Petra in the Septuagint. This transference of meaning, by the nature of its application, is used to reason that if God is our “rock,” and Sela means “rock,” then the place called Petra

is a physical place of safety in a relative way that safety is to be found with God.

In support of this interpretive method we find several verses being cited where it speaks of God being our "rock," which is to interpretively say a "place of safety" for those who seek God. An example is found in a Psalm of David who wrote: "In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in thy righteousness. Bow down thine ear to me; deliver me speedily: be thou my strong rock [Heb. *tsur*, "rock"], for an house of defence to save me. For thou art my rock [Heb. *sela*, "rock"] and my fortress; therefore for thy name's sake lead me, and guide me" (Ps. 31:1-3). (See also, Ps. 71:3-5; 94:22; Isa. 42:11.) [Author's emphasis throughout.]

From this biblical citation and others like it we see that they are used to create a transference of meaning, which is to say that the analogy of God being our "rock" is lifted from its application toward God and then placed on the location of the ancient desert city of Petra. This is done for the simple reason that Petra is sometimes associated with the biblical Sela(h)—meaning "rock"—and consequently the analogy of God being our "rock" is transferred to a place in the wilderness of Jordan.

Notably, however, the Bible does not tell us that Sela (Petra) is a place of safety, but rather it is a questionable interpretive methodology that creates such a place in the Bible.

Simply, some have taken the "wilderness" to which the symbolic "woman" flees and attempted to make it relative to a rocky and desolate place mentioned in the Bible. Then by assuming that this wilderness is a place of safety in the Middle East—as opposed to other places—they make assumptions that associate the "wilderness" of John's vision with the wilderness region that was anciently inhabited by the intermingled community of

the Horites and the later descendants of Esau (called Edom).

Thus, the modern-day organized "church" found a way to create a so-called place of safety from a "wilderness" and then interpretively placed that wilderness into the land of Jordan before the return of Jesus.

Then from this we find a further assumption is made—used as confirmation of the doctrine—by projecting this belief onto a prophecy given to Daniel regarding a military and political incursion into the Middle East.

For according to Daniel's prophecy an expected king of the north: "shall enter also into the glorious land, and many countries shall be overthrown: but these shall escape out of his hand, even Edom, and Moab, and the chief of the children of Ammon. He shall stretch forth his hand also upon the countries: and the land of Egypt shall not escape. But he shall have power over the treasures of gold and of silver, and over all the precious things of Egypt: and the Libyans and the Ethiopians shall be at his steps" (Dan. 11:41-43).

Now, because some have associated a place of safety with Petra in Jordan there is an erroneous supposition made about the land of Jordan and its former tenants—the Moabites, Ammonites and Edomites. That is to say some churches reason that it is their expected presence in Petra in the future that shapes the delimiting nature of this political and military action in the Middle East.

Ignoring, of course, any political alliances, geographic considerations and geopolitical reasons for their "escape," even though these political factors would better explain the delimitation of this military incursion into this part of the world.

Notably, however, Scripture itself tells us there are limitations to this initial political action described in Daniel's prophecy, because what is absent in this geopolitical

scenario is nearly the whole of the African continent, Southeast Asia, the Far East and also North and South America, along with other places that do not fall within the scope of this geographically defined incursion into the Middle East.

Thus, it is a far stretch of the imagination to claim that a small area of the Middle East escapes a structured and planned military movement simply because a church claims that it will be in Petra at the time this prophecy is fulfilled.

Especially when it is not biblically possible to show that the collective organized church will be taken to this region of the world at the time of this political upheaval in the Middle East.

But let's examine this a little more.

The "church" sometimes sees itself as a small flock, and because those who keep the commandments of God feel themselves to be "outcasts" in this world they have assumed that the "outcasts" spoken of by Isaiah the prophet is the church in a place of safety in Petra.

Now, the prophet Isaiah wrote regarding the peoples of Moab (not the church), and said: "Send a lamb to the ruler of the land, from the rock [Heb., *sela*, "rock"] of the desert to the mount of the daughter of Zion. For it is as a fleeing bird cast out of the nest; the daughters of Moab shall be at the fords of Arnon. Take counsel; do judgment; make your shadow as the night in midday; hide the outcasts; do not uncover the fugitive! Let My outcasts stay with you, Moab. Be a hiding place to them from the face of the destroyer. For the exacter has ceased, destruction has failed; the trampler is ended out of the land. And in mercy the throne shall be founded; and he shall sit on it in truth in the tabernacle of David, judging and seeking justice, and swift in righteousness" (Isa. 16:1-5, LITV).

Here we have a situation where it is conjectured that these

“outcasts” are the church in the future, and according to Isaiah’s prophecy they are to be found in the region of Moab by the fords (crossings) of the river Arnon near the northern border of ancient Moab.

However, it is clear that Isaiah is addressing an oracle that relates to the people of Moab, who no longer reside in the area of Jordan. He also speaks of the terrible destruction that will come upon its cities, and by analogy he speaks of the daughters of Moab being like a bird cast out of its nest, and it is they—the daughters of Moab—who are to be found at the fords of the Arnon River.

Therefore, when Isaiah writes of the troubles of Moab we see there are those who flee as outcasts until the troubles have passed, but other than the daughters of Moab, we do not know who the outcasts are in this time of trouble, but the implied setting is when the oppressor comes to an end and the Davidic throne is established (Isa. 15:1-9; 16:1-14).

Thus, given the timeframe of this prophecy it would be more fitting to associate Isaiah’s prophecy with the historical peoples of Moab, Ammon and Edom, but in typology as it relates to the prophecies of the Apostle John and the prophet Daniel, it may be that the term “outcasts” could well apply to a larger theme and also to a narrower context for the peoples of modern-day Israel (Rev. 11:1-8; 12:13-17).

For Jesus said: “Whenever, therefore, ye may see the abomination of the desolation, that was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (whoever is reading let him observe) then those in Judea—let them flee to the mounts; he on the house-top—let him not come down to take up any thing out of his house; and he in the field—let him not turn back to take his garments. And woe to those with child, and to those giving suck in those days; and pray ye that your flight may not be in winter, nor on a sabbath; for there shall be then great tribulation, such as was not from the beginning

of the world till now, no, nor may be” (Mt. 24:15-21, YLT).

Also, we should finally consider that Isaiah was writing an “oracle” for the people of Moab, while remembering that Petra was never located in the former land of the Moabites in the first place, but rather the central ruins of this ancient fortress are farther south in the land formerly associated with the descendants of Esau (Isa. 16:7).

Therefore, Isaiah’s prophecy would not apply to those who currently represent the common assembly of the church of God today.

Allowing us to say that from the evidence of Scripture we cannot conclude that the wilderness to which the symbolic woman flees in the Apostle John’s prophecy is a place of safety, and it is not possible to associate this “wilderness” with the biblical Sela in what is now the archaeological ruins of Petra in Jordan.  **(Final in a four-part series.)**

(andrewburdettewrites.com)

[Resources & Notes](#)

Also see: [Is There a “Place of Safety” for the Church—Part One](#)