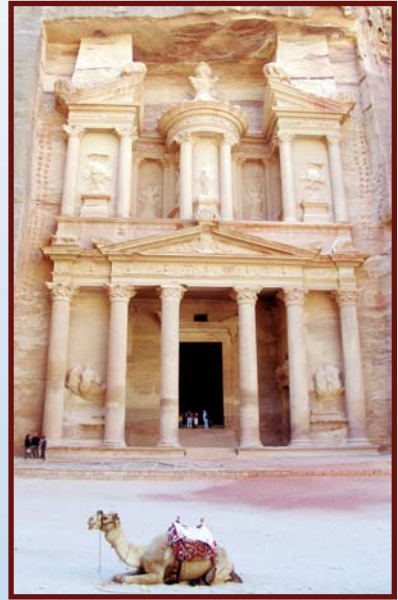


# PETRA

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*by Jim Pitts*

Perhaps the last and maybe the first time you saw Petra was in the adventure film, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Petra, hidden in the southern mountains of Jordan for hundreds of years, was the forgotten city! The memory of Petra was lost and its location hidden. The legend came into view in 1812 by a European explorer, Jean Louis Burkhard. He was one of the first to look upon Petra's fallen wonder and to tell the world of this ancient and awesome place. He described it as "a rose-red city half as old as time."

The primary entrance to Petra is through a winding, dark and narrow "siq" (gorge). In some places it is 10 to 13 feet wide. Along its path are Nabatean monuments carved into its towering sandstone walls over 300 feet high. On the sides of the ravine are channels for water from the Spring of Moses.



*Hewn out of rose red rock, the Khaznet is believed to be the tomb of a Nabatean King.*



*Camels head north through the Wada Araba, an ancient caravan route, toward the Dead Sea.*

This winding passage dramatically opens to a vertical vista of the Khaznet Far'um (Treasury of Pharaoh). The Khaznet, hewn out of rose red rock, is believed to be the tomb of a Nabatean king.

Along a valley are monumental tombs, cliff dwellings two and three stories high, and a theater seating 3,000. Winding through this ancient city site of temples, palaces, baths and private houses is Wadi Musa. This wet weather stream bed proceeds around the mountain and gorge and finally empties into Wadi Araba. Because of its unique geography, Petra offered safety and protection.

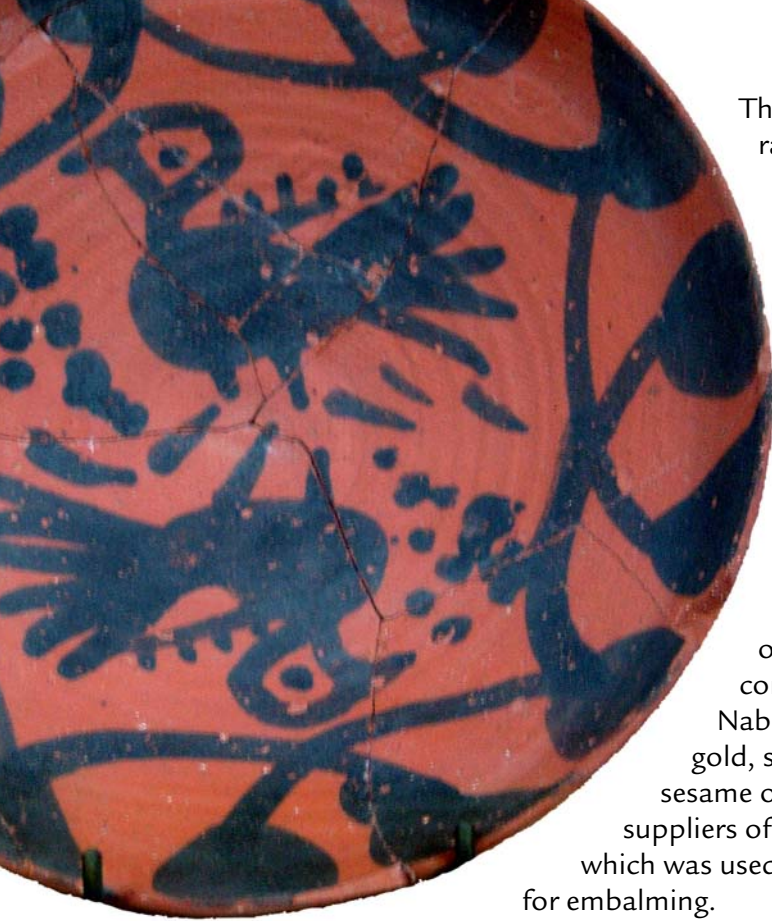
A colonnaded street was the main thoroughfare. On the sides of the street are stone sidewalks. This avenue led to markets, shrines, tombs and to a royal residence.

Petra, the capital of the Nabatean kingdom, originally was an Edomite town. The name Petra and its earlier name, Sela, both mean "Rock." Biblical references to Sela include 2 Kings 14:7; Isaiah 16:1, Judges 1:36, Jeremiah 49:16. Sela was occupied in 797 BC by Amaziah, King of Judah. Around 650 BC the Nabateans paid tribute to the Assyrians.

Formerly nomads living in tents, the Nabateans abandoned their wandering ways and settled into a sedentary life and engaged in trade. They became a highly organized society and eventually dependent on Rome. Petra became a caravan station and flourished as a city of commerce.

Their favorable geographical position became the intersection of caravan routes; goods passed through it to Gaza in the west, to Damascus in the north, to Aqaba on the Red Sea, and across the desert to the Persian Gulf. In their control of the commercial routes, the Nabateans guaranteed the safe-passage of caravans in return for the payment of tolls.

*A narrow gorge opens to a dramatic view of the Khaznet Far'um (Treasury of Pharaoh).*



The commerce of Petra radiated to the farthest points of the civilized world. Myrrh, spices and frankincense from Arabia, silk fabrics from Damascus and Gaza, henna from Ashkelon, glassware and purple from Sidon and Tyre, and pearls from the Persian Gulf were some of their primary commodities. The Nabateans also produced gold, silver, copper and sesame oil. They were suppliers of asphalt (bitumen) which was used by the Egyptians for embalming.

Bringing imagination to the Biblical story, I wonder about those three travelers from the east, following a star and bearing gifts for the Christ child. Their journey from the east most likely followed well worn Nabatean caravan routes. Their legendary gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh represented the commerce of Petra. If not their point of departure, Petra most likely was a way station on their sacred journey.

Christianity came to Petra in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. A bishop resided there. Greek inscriptions in the inner chamber of the Urn Tomb witness to its conversion to a church in 446-447 AD. Later, the Crusaders gave it the name of Li Vaux Moyses (the valley of Moses) and built small forts on surrounding mountaintops.

As a place of sojourn, this storied place is also identified with the Exodus from Egypt. It served as a sanctuary for the patriarchal journey out of bondage to freedom. Although Petra is identified with Sela, which means

*Petra is a treasure trove of pottery. The plate pictured symbolizes funeral feasts where birds and other animals were consumed. Following a feast to honor the dead, the pottery used in the ritual meal was broken and placed in the tomb.*

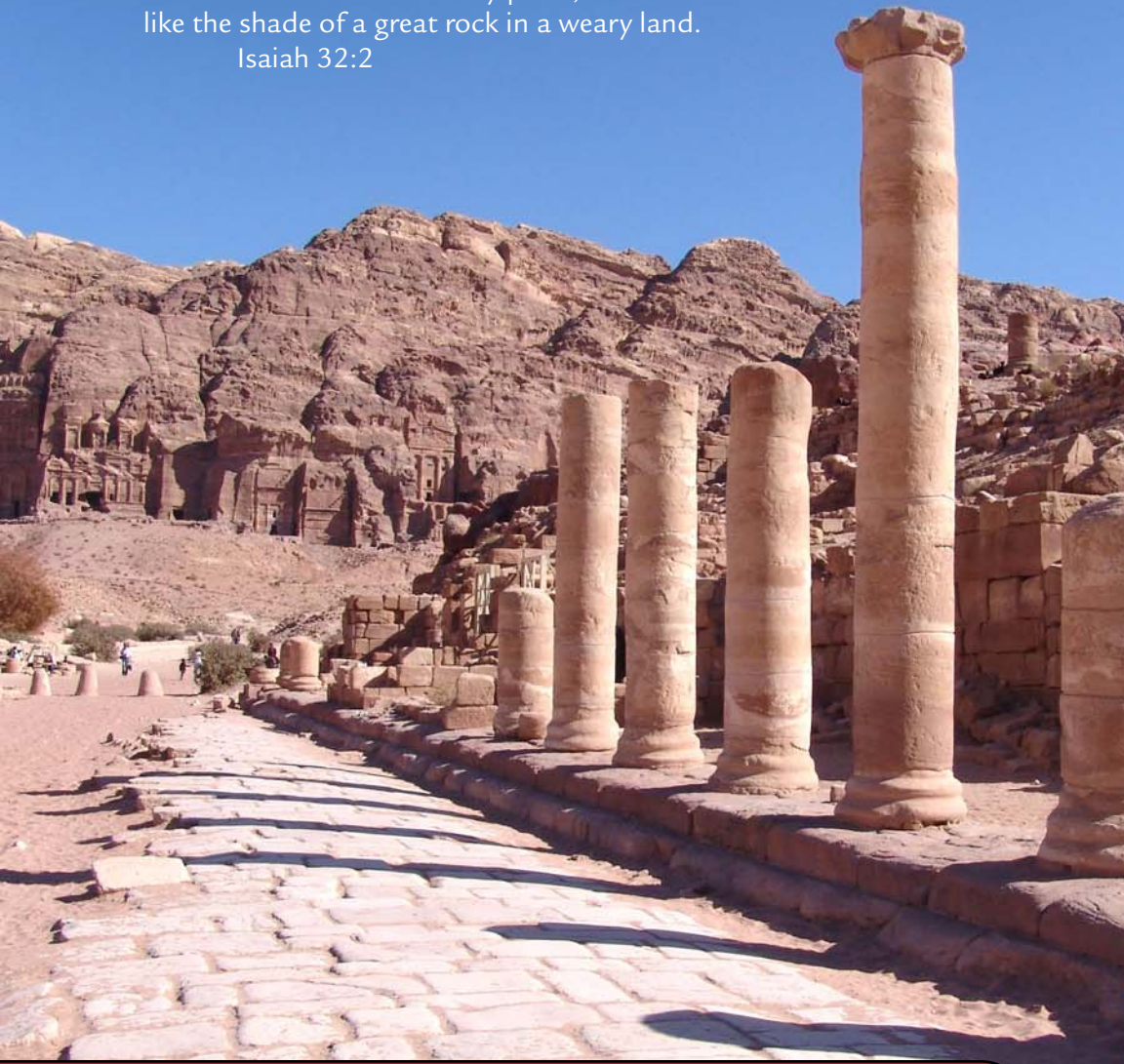
a rock, the scripture refers to it as “the cleft in the rock.” Perhaps this is a reference to the rose-red city’s dramatic entrance as a natural fortress and place of refuge.

*He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock,  
That shadows a dry, thirsty land.*

Frances J. Crosby, 1890

Each will be like a hiding place from the wind,  
a covert from the tempest,  
like streams of water in a dry place,  
like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.

Isaiah 32:2



*A colonnade street lined with shops was the main thoroughfare in ancient Petra, which was noted for its lush gardens, ornate houses and elaborate monuments.*