

VIEW NORTHEAST: GAMLA CONTEXT MAP. SEE "NAHAL SAMACH" ON PAGE 271 AND THE SYNAGOGUE OF EIN KESHATOT IN CHAPTER 4, "ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES," ON PAGE 33.

BELOW (VIEW WEST): THE NORTHERN WALL AND BREACH BELOW THE SYNAGOGUE (BOTTOM LEFT; SEE DETAIL PHOTO ON PAGE 280). ALSO VISIBLE IS THE SEA OF GALILEE (UPPER RIGHT).





VIEW EAST: THE ACROPOLIS OF THE CAMEL-SHAPED FORTRESS OF GAMLA, SHOWING THE STEEP RAVINES ON THE NORTH, SOUTH, AND WEST SIDES. COMPARE WITH THE MAP ON PAGE 274.

GAMLA

What we know about Gamla historically comes from the first chapter of book four in Josephus's account of the Jewish Wars against Rome. It's entitled "The Siege and Taking of Gamala" (Josephus's spelling). This ancient Jewish city is about 6 miles (9.6 kilometers) east of the Sea of Galilee on a hill surrounded on three sides by steep ravines. At the beginning of the revolt against Rome, King Agrippa II (Herod's successor) was able to unite certain cities in support of Rome while opposing the rebellion. "Yet," according to Josephus, "did not Gamala accede to them but relied upon the difficulty of the place, which was greater than that of Jotapata" (see "Jotapata" on page 99). Josephus continued his description of the site:

For it [Gamla] was situated upon a rough ridge of a high mountain, with a kind of neck in the middle. Where it begins to ascend, it lengthens itself, and declines as much downward before as behind, insomuch that it is like a camel in figure, from whence it is so named [*Gamal* is Hebrew for camel]. On the side and the face there are abrupt parts divided from the rest, and ending in vast deep valleys.¹

Josephus added the following about the city's natural defenses, which attracted Jews who opposed Rome:

As this city was naturally hard to be taken, so had Josephus, by building a wall about it, made it still stronger. . . . The people that were in it were made more bold by the nature of the place, than the people of Jotapata had been, but it had much fewer fighting men in it; and they had such a confidence in the situation of the place, that they thought the enemy could not be too many for them; for the city had been filled with those that had fled to it for safety, on account of its strength.²



VIEW EAST: NAHAL GAMLA FORMS THE CANYON BELOW GAMLA FALLS (SEE THE MAP ON PAGE 274). THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN STANDING ON THE NORTH SIDE OF GAMLA, OVERLOOKING THE CANYON.

BELOW: THE STONE CORBEL (HORIZONTAL BEAM) UPHELD THE ROOF. THE CEILING OF THIS ROOM WAS THE FLOOR OF THE BUILDING ABOVE IT. THE SECOND-STORY BUILDINGS COLLAPSED UNDER THE WEIGHT OF THE ROMAN SOLDIERS.





VIEW EAST: NAHAL DALIYOT FORMS THE CANYON ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF GAMLA. THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN STANDING ON THE SOUTH SIDE. AT THE HEAD OF THE CANYON IS THE POPULAR DALIYOT RECREATIONAL CAMP.

After the citizens of Gamla raised the flag of rebellion against Rome, Herod Agrippa II laid siege to the town for seven months. When he failed to conquer the fort, the task was left to the Roman general Vespasian, who made two attempts. On the first, Jewish resistance was so intense that the Romans were forced to retreat with heavy losses. According to Josephus,

These Romans could neither beat those back that were above them, nor escape the force of their own men that were forcing their way forward, they were compelled to fly into their enemies houses, which were low; but these houses, being thus full of soldiers, whose weight they could not bear, fell down suddenly; and when one house fell, it shook down a great many of those that were under it, as did those do to such as were under them. By this means a vast number of the Romans perished [see photo and caption at the bottom of page 276].³

After the failure of the first attempt, Vespasian was able to restore the morale of his men and convince them to resume the fight. Josephus described what happened:

Vespasian comforted his army, which was much dejected by reflecting on their ill success, and because they had never before fallen into such a calamity, and besides this, because they were greatly ashamed that they had left their general alone in great dangers.

As recorded by Josephus, Vespasian rallied his men to the fight with the following speech:

We ought therefore to return to our own virtue, and to be rather angry, than any longer dejected at this unlucky misfortune, and let every one seek for his own consolation from his own hand; for by this



VIEW NORTHEAST: THE JEWS DIDN'T BUILD WALLS AROUND THE CITY BECAUSE OF THE STEEP RAVINES THAT PROTECTED IT ON THREE SIDES. THEY BUILT THE EASTERN WALL (CENTER RIGHT) BY FILLING IN GAPS BETWEEN HOUSES (CENTER LEFT).

BELOW: BALLISTA ARTILLERY ENGINE USED TO HURL STONE MISSILES. IT HAD A MAXIMUM RANGE OF ABOUT 400 METERS AND FIRED MISSILES WEIGHING FROM 1.8 POUNDS (800 GRAMS) TO MANY KILOGRAMS (1 KG = 2.2 LB).





VIEW WEST: DETAIL OF THE BREACH IN THE DEFENSE WALL OF GAMLA. THE ROMANS BREACHED THE WALL, THEN FOUGHT THE JEWISH DEFENDERS UP THE HILL IN HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT.

means he will avenge those that have been destroyed, and punish those that have killed them. For myself I will endeavour, as I have now done, to go first before you against your enemies in every engagement, and to be the last that retires from it.⁴

Sometimes referred to as the “Masada of the north,” Gamla was one of the last cities in northern Palestine to fall before the Roman legions (see “Masada” in *Blessed Pilgrimage*, vol. 2). In its excavations, a small number of unique Jewish coins were found with the inscription “For the Redemption of Holy Jerusalem.” The Gamla Nature Reserve website explains the significance of the coins:

This find indicates the connection between the people of Gamla and the Temple, and that the Great Revolt was a countrywide, organized rebellion and not just a local uprising. It is noteworthy that even under the hardship of siege, the defenders of Gamla did not forget the purpose of the revolt—to free Jerusalem and the Temple from the Roman yoke.⁵

Gamla was the capital of the Golan district, but after its destruction in 67 AD, it was never rebuilt. Herod the Great settled Jews in Gamla, so we wonder whether Jesus visited the city. We may never know, but Gamla had a synagogue and was a relatively short distance from Bethsaida for travelers ascending Nahal Gamla from the Sea of Galilee. The modern road runs along the ridge above the canyon on the south. I walked from the Gamla Nature Reserve to the Daliyot forest campground, then west along the ridge overlooking Nahal Daliyot leading to the Sea of Galilee (see the photo on page 275). It’s only a half-day journey.⁶

Gamaliel mentioned Judas of Galilee in his defense of Peter and John when he counseled moderation: “After [Theudas] rose up Judas of Galilee . . . and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed” (Acts 5:37). Judas the Zealot had led an uprising in 6 AD.

SYNAGOGUE OF GAMLA⁷

The synagogue of Gamla was built at the beginning of the first century AD near the entrance to the town (see the drawing on page 281). It may be the earliest found in Israel and one of only six built while Herod's temple was still standing.

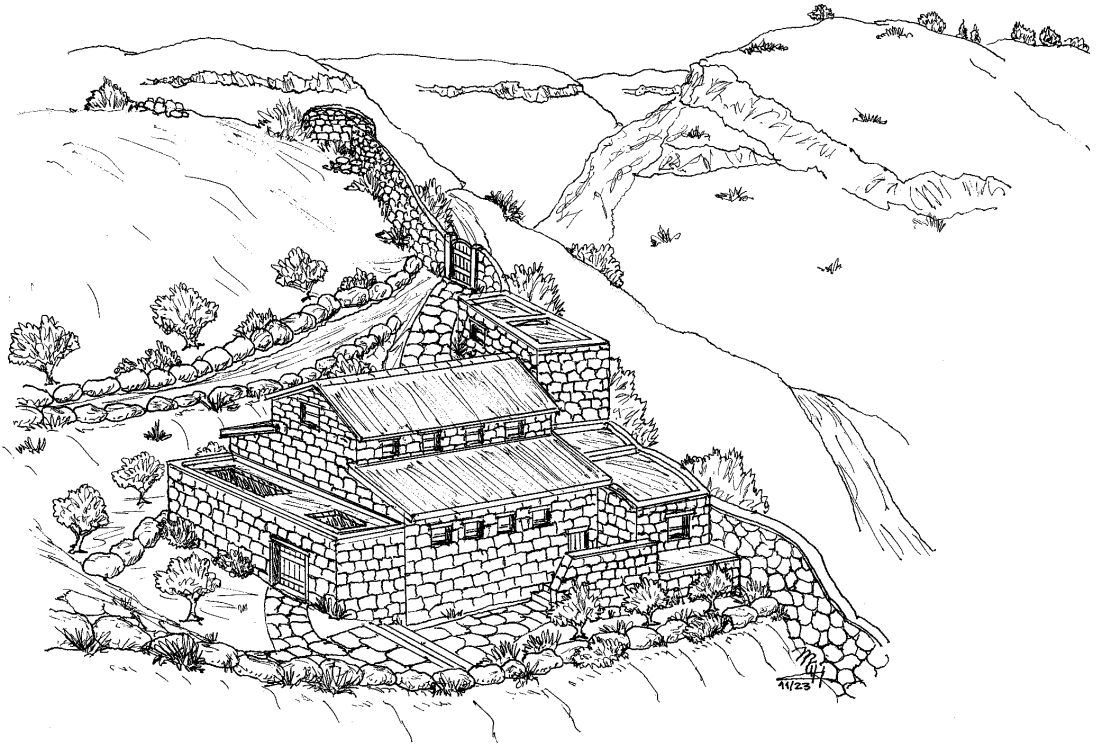
The synagogue was built in the typical style with a slanted roof to protect against the heavier rainfall of the Galilee region. It contained three rows of columns to support the roof, with side benches for sitting and discussion (see the bottom photo on page 281).



VIEW WEST: DETAIL OF COVERED MIQVEH (JEWISH RITUAL BATH) LOCATED ON THE WEST SIDE OF THE SYNAGOGUE. SEE PHOTO BELOW.

BELOW (VIEW WEST): THE GAMLA SYNAGOGUE (CENTER) WITH THE EASTERN WALL IN FRONT. ALSO PICTURED IS ONE OF THREE BREACHES IN THE WALL (LOWER LEFT) AND A MIQVEH (COVERED BUILDING, CENTER—SEE ABOVE PHOTO).





VIEW NORTHEAST: MIKE HANSEN'S CONCEPTION OF THE GAMLA SYNAGOGUE FROM ABOVE NAHAL DALIYOT (SEE PHOTO ON PAGE 277), LOOKING TOWARD NAHAL GAMLA (TOP CENTER; SEE TOP PHOTO ON PAGE 276).

BELOW (VIEW NORTHEAST): THE INTERIOR OF THE FIRST CENTURY AD SYNAGOGUE WITH THREE COLUMNS AND SIDE BENCHES. THE NORTHWEST CORNER CONTAINED AN ALCOVE FOR TORAH SCROLLS.





VIEW EAST: NAHAL GAMLA WITH GAMLA FALLS AT THE HEAD OF THE CANYON (UPPER CENTER IN THE SHADOWS). THE GAMLA FALLS ARE THE HIGHEST IN ISRAEL (SEE BELOW).

BELOW (VIEW EAST): DETAIL OF GAMLA FALLS (SEE THE MAP ON PAGE 274). YOU CAN HIKE TO THE FALLS FROM THE GAMLA NATURE RESERVE PARKING LOT. THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN ON FEBRUARY 2, 2022.





VIEW WEST: THE TRAIL TO GAMLA FALLS TAKES YOU THROUGH THIS FIELD OF DOLMENS, WHICH WERE STONE TABLES USED FOR BURIAL. YOU CAN ALSO SEE THE CANYON EDGE OF NAHAL GAMLA (UPPER CENTER).

ENDNOTES

1 Flavius Josephus, *Seven Books of the Jewish War*, in *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus the Jewish Historian*, trans. William Whiston (London, 1737), 4:1:1, <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus>.

2 Josephus, *Seven Books of the Jewish War*, 4:1:2.

3 Josephus, *Seven Books of the Jewish War*, 4:1:4.

4 Josephus, *Seven Books of the Jewish War*, 4:1:6.

5 “Gamla Nature Reserve—History and Archaeology,” Israel Nature and Parks Authority, accessed July 15, 2024, <https://en.parks.org.il/reserve-park/gamla-nature-reserve>.

6 Mark recorded: “And he said unto [His disciples], Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also: for therefore came I forth. And he preached in their synagogues throughout *all* Galilee, and cast out devils” (Mark 1:38–39, emphasis added). Matthew left a similar witness: “And Jesus went about *all* Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people” (Matt. 4:23, emphasis added).

7 See “Gamla Synagogue” in chapter 4, “Ancient Synagogues,” on page 39.