

Ancient Ephesus

A Paper

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The ancient city of Ephesus, located in Western Asia Minor, near the Cayster River, was the most important ancient city of Asia Minor. The archaeological remains of Ephesus are found near a small town, Selcuk, just 18 miles away from Kusadasi. Ancient Ephesus was a heavily populated city. At the time of the Apostle Paul, it is estimated that 200,000 people lived there.¹ It was an important political, commercial, and educational center. During the Roman era it was called, “the first and greatest metropolis of Asia.”² Politically it was the center for governing the Roman province of Asia. Commercially, it was the largest trade center in Asia Minor. A Greek geographer by the name of Strabo said it was the largest commercial center west of the Taurus Mountains.³ Educationally, the Celsus Library demonstrates the great emphasis placed on learning.⁴ Although the location of Ephesus was politically and commercially influential, the city was best known for its religious center. There was located the Artemision, an enormous temple dedicated to the Greek goddess Artemis⁵, also known by her Roman name Diana. Demetrius the silversmith implied that this temple was known throughout Asia and all over the world (Acts 19:27). The temple of Artemis was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was rebuilt after the fire in 356BC. It was built from marble, and was the largest building of the ancient world. Artemis was considered the protector of the city of Ephesus. In addition to the temple, a second architectural wonder was located in Ephesus, a 25,000 seat outdoor auditorium.

The city of Ephesus has considerable biblical significance. Paul visited Ephesus, after departing from Corinth, on his second missionary journey. Priscilla and Aquila accompanied him there, and remained after Paul departed (Acts 18:18-19). His time there, on his second missionary journey was short due to his haste to return to Jerusalem. He reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue (18:19), and departed soon afterwards. Paul returned to Ephesus on his third missionary journey. He baptized approximately twelve believers, who subsequently received the Holy Spirit, spoke in tongues, and prophesied (19:5-6). Paul spoke persuasively in the synagogue of Ephesus for three months (19:8). For over two additional years he taught in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (19:9). Paul performed many miracles (19:11-12). Many converted who formerly practiced magic. These converts burned their books which was valued at 50,000 pieces of silver, or approximately 50,000 days’ wages (19:19).⁶ A great disturbance took place in this city, led by

¹ John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 178.

² M. G. Easton, *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), electronic edition.

³ Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale reference library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 437.

⁴ H. L. Willmington, *Willmington’s Bible Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997), 703.

⁵ Artemis was believed to be Apollo’s sister, one of the twelve Olympians, and a virgin huntress.

⁶ Because magical formulas were so common in Ephesus they became called Ephesian grammata, or Ephesian Letters. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Ac 19:19–20.

Demetrius the silversmith. Although he penned his words in such a way as defending the name-sake of the city, it seems apparent his real concern was monetary. Demetrius was standing to lose a significant amount of money due to the conversions from the worship of Artemis to Christ. For about two hours, in the theatre they shouted “great is Artemis,” but eventually the mob disbanded out of fear of reprisal from Rome (19:40-41). Paul departed to Macedonia thereafter (20:1). During Paul’s second Roman imprisonment, at a point where his death was imminent, Paul commissioned Timothy to stay in Ephesus and protect the church from false teaching (1 Tim 1:3). The Ephesian church is mentioned as the first of seven referenced in the book of Revelation (1:11; 2:1). Church tradition says that John’s center of ministry was located there following his release from Patmos. Supposedly he also took care of Mary the mother of Jesus in Ephesus.

John Turtle Wood, who lived from 1821-1890, was a British engineer, architect, and archaeologist. He was given the task of designing a railway station in Turkey. It was during this process that he became interested in searching for the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus. He began archaeological searches in Ephesus in the year 1863, commissioned by the British Museum. He had limited resources. In his own words, “My chief purpose in undertaking the excavations... was to find the remains of the Great Temple of Diana which had been buried for so many centuries. All trace of it above ground had disappeared, and many even doubted whether such a building ever existed.”⁷ Wood goes on to explain that he understood that in order to be given additional money for discovering the temple, he must first produce other archaeological evidence of places which were of interest to the British Museum. The Odeum and the Great Theatre were two such places.⁸ Since his efforts were successful, and the trustees of the British Museum were satisfied with his results, he was permitted to use some funds towards searching for the temple. Wood searched for six years with no success. Around the time that the trustees had given up on these efforts, a discovery was made. He states,

I most fortunately hit upon the corner of the peribolus wall, containing inscriptions which placed beyond doubt the fact that the approximate site of the Temple was at last discovered. Sufficient sums of money were then granted by the Trustees to complete the discovery.⁹

Wood faced many challenges¹⁰ but persisted and his persistence paid off. Wood continued his excavations until April of 1874. In 1895, Otto Benndorf, under the auspices of the Austrian Archaeological Institute, began excavating and the institute has continued ever since, apart from

⁷ J. T. Wood, *Discoveries at Ephesus including the site and remains of the great temple of Diana*, (London: Longmans Green), vii.

⁸ Ibid.,

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Wood was under funded, contracted Malaira, was accused of “treasure seeking” by the Ottoman authorities, was attacked by bandits, stabbed in the chest by an attacker, and at one point over half of his 70 man work force was put in prison and under investigation for a murder. Terry Richardson, “Unearthing Ephesus with John Turtle Wood,” in *Today's Zaman*, January 2010. <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-198967-116-digging-up-turkeys-past-unearthing-ephesus-with-john-turtle-wood.html>, (accessed, 2/17/2014).

hours, the Ephesians shouted “great is Artemis.” This theatre is still used today for special celebrations.

Little remains of the Artemesian. Some remains of this temple are dated as early as the 6th century BC. Initially the Temple of Artemis had 36 columns, but in the 2nd century BC it was later enlarged by Kreisos, the king of Lydian. The final temple had a total of 125 columns approximately 17.5 meters high. It was approximately 115 meters long and 55 wide. It would have contained two rows of columns on the long sides, and three on the shortest. A statue of Artemis is believed to have stood in a courtyard. This temple was devastated by a fire, an earthquake, and finally looted by the Goths.¹³ The British Museum in London displays the remains discovered by John Turtle Wood. The oldest portions date back to the 6th century, but the majority are believed to be from the 2nd century. One of the best preserved column bases (located to the right) can also be located at the British Museum. On this base, seven people are pictured. There is a lot of mystery surrounding the figures, but a clear representation of Hermes, the messenger god, is found on it. He appears to be leading a woman to the afterlife. Thanatos, a winged youth, who is the personification of death, is also depicted holding a sword.¹⁴



Statues of Artemis were uncovered at Ephesus by Wood in the 1870's. Hogarth also discovered Artemis statues as did the Austrian and Turkish archaeologist. Artemis was the goddess of abundance, hunting and wild life. She is depicted as a woman wearing a crown, and a garland of flowers (the flowers represent her influence upon Spring). She has lions on her arms, along with the bulls, lions, stags, legendary griffins, flowers and bees on her legs. This identifies her as the goddess of wildlife. In the Selcuk Museum, one can find the remains of the statue to the left. A similar image supposedly fell from heaven. Ancient coins were also discovered at Ephesus. On them was the depiction of Artemis, Roman name Diana, as well as the temple, for which Ephesus was famous.



The remains of another magnificent structure, is also visible at ancient Ephesus, the Celsus Library. This library was



¹³ <http://www.ephesus.us/ephesus/templeofartemis.htm>, (accessed, 1/17/2014).

¹⁴ http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/gr/m/column_drum-temple_of_artemis.aspx

built between AD 115-125, dedicated to the proconsul of Asia, after whom the library is named (Gaius Julius Celsus), and upon whose grave it is built.¹⁵ The inside of the library is 70 feet by 80 feet and was capable of holding 15,000 scrolls.¹⁶ At the time, it would have been the third largest in the ancient world, behind Alexandria and Pergamum.¹⁷ The façade of the building was restored by the Austrian Archaeological Institute. There are three columns (Corinthian style), three entrances, three windows, and four statues. The statues represent wisdom (Sophia), knowledge (Episteme), intelligence (Ennoia) and valor (Arete). The ones in ancient Ephesus are reproductions. The originals are at the Ephesus Museum in Vienna. Although, the library was not present at the time of the events recorded in the Bible, it does point to the significance of this ancient city.

Not only is Ephesus famous to students of the Bible because of the events surrounding Paul's life, it is also famous for being specifically named by John. John's Revelation was written for and delivered to the church of Ephesus as well as six other churches in Asia Minor. A personal rebuke is recorded by Jesus to the church of Ephesus.

To the angel of the church in Ephesus...you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.¹⁸

It is believed that John was buried near Ephesus. In the fourth century, a chapel was built upon the supposed grave of the apostle John. It was enlarged by Justinian in the fifth century. The remains of St. John's Basilica is still visible today. It was constructed in the shape of a cross and included six domes, the tomb of John being under the center dome (see pictures below).¹⁹

The finds in and around Ephesus do confirm the biblical record. The ancient city of Ephesus was a port city (where Paul traveled to and from), an amphitheater exists (where the mob brought Paul's ministry associates), and the city was famous for its worship of Artemis. The populace and importance of the city also confirms Paul's typical mode of operation, to select key cities of influence as the locations to establish churches. And in a more general sense, the discoveries of this ancient city, which are more significant than any other city of Asia Minor, help the reader of the New Testament better understand the historical context of the ancient world.

¹⁵ <http://www.bibleplaces.com/ephesus.htm>, (accessed, 2/20/2014).

¹⁶ Ibid.,

¹⁷ <http://www.ephesus.us/ephesus/celsuslibrary.htm>, (accessed, 2/20/2014).

¹⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Re 2:1–7.

¹⁹ Procopius, in his ancient writing called *The Buildings*, (book V) speak of these events as fact. His writings are published in the Loeb Classical Library visible online at: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/5*.html, (accessed, 2/20/2014).



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