

EPHESUS AND THE EPHESIAN DISTURBANCE

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A Brief History of Ephesus

Ephesus was a port city with access to great roads and harbors. When Augustus became emperor (27 BCE), he replaced Pergamum with Ephesus as the capital of proconsular "Asia"-what today is Western Asia Minor. Ephesus's new status made it both the seat of the governor and a major center of commerce. It was strategic geographically, politically, and-of special relevance to this topic-religiously.

The city was the guardian of Artemis's temple, a major banking center and one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was also guardian of the Roman imperial cult. And it became an important site of early Christianity. One can see this in the New Testament itself: Priscilla and Aquila, Paul's partners in tent making and ministry, moved to Ephesus with him (Acts 18:19); for two years and three months, the city served as a base for Paul (Acts 19:8, 10; ca. 50-53 CE). And en route to or from Ephesus, Paul probably wrote 1 Corinthians (see 1 Cor 16:8), Ephesians, and 1 and 2 Timothy. The addressee of the latter two, Timothy, continued to minister in Ephesus even after his mentor had departed (1 Tim 1:3). And one of the seven churches of Revelation is Ephesus (Rev 2:1-7).

That's what Scripture itself says. But tradition adds more. It places Jesus' mother in Ephesus along with the elder John after his exile on Patmos in the '90s. Thus, the Gospel of John is thought to have been written in Ephesus, and the elder John is believed to have written 1, 2, and 3 John to nearby communities of believers. That's a lot of influence by Ephesus on the New Testament.

Ephesus: The Disturbance

Acts 19 gives readers the most extended, specific narrative establishing the city's religious context at the time of the earliest Christians. Sorcerers burned magic books (Acts 19:18-20), Paul taught daily in a lecture hall (Acts 19:9-10), and an uprising made the apostle decide to end his time in the city earlier than planned (Acts 19:23-20:1). The problem? Serious opposition from followers of Artemis.

In the verses below from Acts 19:19-22, notice how deeply embedded Artemis's cult is, both in the city and across the empire. Note, too, how an uprising of the goddess's followers causes Paul to expedite his departure plan (emphasis mine):

Large numbers of those who had practiced magic collected their books and burned them up in the presence of everyone. When the value of the books was added up, it was found to total 50,000 silver coins. In this way the word of the Lord continued to grow in power and to prevail.

Now after all these things had taken place, Paul resolved to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. He said, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." So after sending two of his assistants, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, he himself stayed on for a while in the province of Asia.

After this, as Luke records it, a silversmith who profited from selling silver shrines of Artemis gathered workers in similar trades and reminded them that Paul had persuaded people across their province that "gods made by hands are not gods at all" (Acts 19:26). This worker saw Paul's ministry as a threat both to profits and to Artemis's temple, not to mention the renown of the goddess herself.

¹ taken from *Nobody's Mother: Artemis of the Ephesians in Antiquity and the New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2023).



Upon hearing this, the workers grew enraged and shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (Acts 19:28). Fervor spread across the city, and a crowd rushed into the 25,000-seat theater. Two of Paul's Macedonian traveling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, got dragged in, but the disciples and some provincial authorities who liked Paul kept out the apostle. Most of the confused members of the crowd didn't even know why they had gathered (Acts 19:32); some thought it was about Alexander, because some Jews had pushed him to the front. But when Alexander gestured that he wanted to speak, "they recognized that he was a Jew," and "they all shouted in unison, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' for about two hours" (Acts 19:33-34; emphasis added).

The city clerk quieted the crowd, asking them a rhetorical question: "Who does not know that [Ephesus] is the keeper of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image that fell from heaven?" (Acts 19:35; emphasis added). This clerk urged people to lodge any complaints through proper channels, lest they be charged with rioting (Acts 19:40), a serious offense, and sent them home. Meanwhile, Paul gathered the disciples, bid them farewell, and departed for Macedonia. One can see here that Ephesus lies in the grip of magic and Artemis worship, Paul has sent Timothy on ahead to Macedonia, and Jewish people are already on the Ephesians' bad side (Acts 19:33-34). At this point in nascent Christianity people still consider followers of Jesus to be a sect within Judaism.

Paul must have later sent Timothy back to Ephesus, because within the first lines of his first epistle to Timothy, Paul writes, "As I urged you when I was leaving for Macedonia, stay on in Ephesus to instruct certain people not to spread false teachings" (1 Tim 1:3). One might wonder what sort of false doctrines Paul had on his mind when writing to Timothy with strategies for ongoing pastoral care.