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Ephesus in History and Prophecy

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Ephesus was a thriving metropolis in western Asia Minor in the first century. It also became a center of Christian expansion. However, by the end of the first century the church in Ephesus had lost much of its original spiritual passion. Jesus addressed the church in Ephesus as the first of seven churches of Asia Minor in the book of Revelation, pointing out this church's flagging love for Him. The church at Ephesus serves as a warning for all Christians to fervently fire up their faith.

Geographical Setting

Ephesus was ideally situated for trade and, consequently, the dissemination of ideas including the gospel of Jesus Christ. "Ephesus lay at the mouth of the Cayster between the Koressos Range and the sea. Like all the river valleys around the great blunt end of the Asian continent's westward protrusion, that of the Cayster was the terminal of a trade route which linked with other roads converging and branching out towards the separated civilizations and tribes of the east and the Asian steppes."¹

In addition to its prime location for trade, Ephesus boasted a bustling inland harbor for much of its existence. However, due to erosion the harbor needed to be dredged regularly and it eventually gathered so much silt that it lost its usefulness. "The one serious problem that afflicted Ephesus was the progressive silting of its harbor by the river Cayster, threatening eventually to block its access to the sea. Today the coastline has retreated six miles, and the ruins of the city are stranded inland."² Consequently, over the centuries Ephesus lost its vibrancy as a trading center.

Political Background

As a city, Ephesus came into existence early in history and, under various ruling nations, developed as a political stronghold.

Ephesus was an ancient city when Paul arrived. By the middle of the second millennium B.C., settlers of Asiatic origin inhabited the site. During the eleventh century, Athenians arrived and gradually assimilated the older population, founding one of the twelve cities of the Ionian Confederation. After varying periods of independence and absorption into neighboring empires, Ephesus came into the Roman Empire in 133 B.C. as part of the province of Asia.³

Ephesus enjoyed a season of prosperity under Rome and became one of the largest cities in the empire with a population of around 300,000.⁴ However, Ephesus eventually fell to Gothic raiders in A.D. 263.⁵

Socio-Economic Significance

Due to its strategic location Ephesus' primary strength lay in trade. "Ephesus was the trade center of the area."⁶ Trade in Ephesus moved from both inland Asia Minor via roads and the Mediterranean Sea via the city's harbor. Ephesus became the "de facto capital of

the province, known as ‘Supreme Metropolis of Asia.’”⁷ As such, Ephesus became the seat of the Roman proconsul.⁸

Religious Influences

Ephesus boasted a long religious history beginning with the earliest settlers who likely worshipped a fertility goddess. “When Greek colonists settled at the mouth of the Cayster valley in the tenth, or as some say, the twelfth century before Christ, they found among the primitive Anatolian population of the region the cult of a nature-goddess, associated probably with fertility rituals, and cherishing as a cult object a meteoric stone, the ‘image which fell down from Zeus’ of the guild-master’s clever speech.”⁹ The Greeks adapted the worship of this goddess to their own pantheon. “On to this barbarous worship the Greek colonists, in typical Greek fashion, grafted the worship of the huntress-virgin Artemis.”¹⁰ This goddess became, under Roman influence, Diana. The images of this fertility goddess portray “a strangely ornamented figure with its upper half hung with bunches of dates, or, as some thought, with incongruously multiple breasts.”¹¹

A temple built to honor the goddess Artemis (Diana) became a central feature of life in Ephesus. This temple was “four times the size of the Athens’ Parthenon . . . adorned by the sculptors Pheidias and Praxiteles, and the painter Apelles . . . fabulously rich with the votive offerings of Asia . . . widely depicted on coins.”¹² The temple of Diana in Ephesus was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World. “Thousands of priests and priestesses were involved in her service. Many of the priestesses were dedicated to cult prostitution.”¹³ In addition to the temple of Diana, Ephesus boasted a large public theater that could seat 25,000 people.¹⁴

Biblical References

The New Testament refers to Ephesus over twenty times, most often in regard to Paul’s missionary efforts. Paul made a brief stop at Ephesus during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21) and then followed up with a two-year ministry in this strategic city during his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10). It was during this period of time that the book of Acts describes a riot in Ephesus, including a mention of the goddess Artemis and the city’s theater (Acts 19:23-41). Later, Paul wrote the book of Ephesians to the Christians in Ephesus. In Revelation 2:1-7 Jesus warned the church at Ephesus to repent over its loss of its first love for Him. Like the silting harbor of Ephesus, the hearts of the Christians had become immobilized by carelessness and compromise. Ephesus becomes a reminder to Christians today to constantly stir up their love for Jesus.

¹ Blaiklock, E. M. *The Archaeology of the New Testament*. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984, p 121.

² Hemer, C. J. “Seven Cities of Asia Minor.” In *Major Cities of the Biblical World*, R. K. Harrison, Editor. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985, p. 236.

³ Vos, Howard F. *Archaeology in Bible Lands*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1977, p. 318.

⁴ Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*. Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1965, p. 65.

⁵ Vos, p. 319.

⁶ Johnson, Alan F. “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12. Frank E. Gaebelin, Editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 433.

⁷ Johnson, p. 433.

⁸ Blaiklock, E. M. *The Archaeology of the New Testament*, p. 122.

⁹ Blaiklock, Cities, Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 63.

¹⁰ Blaiklock, Cities, Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 63.

¹¹ Blaiklock, Cities, Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 63.

¹² Blaiklock, Cities, Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 63.

¹³ Johnson, p. 433.

¹⁴ Blaiklock, E. M. *The Archaeology of the New Testament*. p. 120.