

Jot & Tittle

A Journal Devoted to the Study of the Inspired Word of God

July 2013

Sardis in History and Prophecy

by Dana L. Goodnough

The ancient city of Sardis had a rich, yet tragic history. Its only biblical mention is in the book of Revelation (1:11; 3:1, 4), where the church of that city is described as being dead in spite of its reputation for life. Like the city itself, the church of Sardis seems to have put up a good front with too much self-confidence and too little substance.

Geographical Setting

Sardis was located in western Asia Minor where it held a strategic position geographically. “Its location commanded the trade of the Aegean Islands and the military road through the important Hermus River valley. Sardis enjoyed prominence as a commercially prosperous and militarily strategic city throughout its history.”¹

Sardis consisted of a lofty acropolis perched on a ridge of Mount Tmolus high above the surrounding plane as well as the expanding city at the base of the mountain. The acropolis was nearly impregnable, giving the city a false sense of security as its history reveals. Its natural resources coupled with its location at a major crossroad, Sardis carried significant economic influence.

Political Background

Because of its strategic location Sardis became the capital of ancient Lydia. Its most famous king, Croesus, is known in history for his great wealth coupled with his demise under the power of the Persians. Croesus had conquered the neighboring cities of the region and allowed his successes to go to his head. His wealth and power bred arrogance. “Solon, the Athenian lawgiver, had once visited him in Sardis, and warned him to beware of self-satisfaction, and to count no man as happy, until the end of life had set him free at last from all danger of a sudden change of fortune.”² This warning proved too true in Croesus’ life.

Learning about the rising power of Cyrus in Persia, Croesus determined to launch a preemptive strike. He first, however, consulted the Greek oracle of Delphi. “Apollo’s reply was: ‘If you cross the River Halys you will destroy a great empire.’ He crossed the Halys, met the Persians in battle, and destroyed a great empire—his own.”³ Cyrus soundly defeated Croesus and the Lydian army.

Croesus returned to his stronghold at Sardis but Cyrus quickly arrived on the scene. Croesus, confident in his position, failed to take proper precautions. Cyrus promised a reward to any of his soldiers who could enter the fortress. A man named Hyroeades took up the challenge. Although the fortress was perched on a steep cliff, access was indeed possible. Hyroeades happened to see one of the Lydian soldiers descend from the stronghold to retrieve a helmet that had fallen down the hillside. Hyroeades followed the Lydian soldier back up the concealed path, entered the fortress, and made way for the Persians to conquer. Thus, in 549 B.C. Croesus lost his great prestige, wealth, and power.

Sardis continued to hold a place of prominence in the region under the Persians until the conquest of Alexander the Great. Later it found itself under the thumb of the Seleucid dynasty. Eventually one of the Seleucid kings, Antiochus the Great, repeated Cyrus’ conquest

when one of his soldiers found a way up into the acropolis. Sardis failed to learn from its own history.

During the period of Roman dominance Sardis was heavily destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 17. Although the city survived, its better days were behind it. Sardis made a bid to build a temple in honor of Emperor Tiberius in gratitude for his help in rebuilding Sardis, but that honor went to Smyrna instead.⁴ Although Sardis later had moments of prosperity, it never regained its political clout.

Socio-Economic Significance

Sardis' original opulence was the result of its mineral resources and its geographical location. The city was located "at the junction of the royal highways linking Ephesus, Pergamum, and Smyrna with the interior of Asia Minor."⁵ As a crossroads city, Sardis gained economic influence. In addition, Sardis was located on the Pactolus River which was rich in gold. "Ancient Sardis derived much of its wealth from the gold found in the sand of the Pactolus River, and the city issued the first gold and silver coins struck in antiquity."⁶ Croesus' wealth was legendary for this very reason.

Religious Influences

Sardis had both strong pagan and Jewish populations. In Roman times the city of Sardis constructed an impressive temple to Cybele, later identified with the goddess Artemis. "The temple of Artemis at Sardis has been uncovered. It appears that under the influence of the Cybele cult of Ephesus that goddess was associated with Artemis in joint worship."⁷ In addition to pagan worship, a sizeable Jewish presence was known even prior to the Roman era. Josephus recorded a first century B.C. decree from Caesar Augustus to the magistrates of Sardis "not to forbid the Jews, how many soever they be, from assembling together according to the custom of their

forefathers, nor from sending their money to Jerusalem."⁸ Archaeological evidence reveals the presence of an unusually large synagogue in Sardis in the second century A.D.⁹

Biblical References

The roots of Christianity in Sardis are unknown, although the church at Sardis probably formed under the influence of Paul's followers in Ephesus. Sardis is mentioned only in Revelation (1:11; 3:1, 14) where the church is described as having a reputation for life while in reality being spiritually dead. Like the city itself, overconfident in its wealth and strategic location while all too susceptible to demise, the church at Sardis was poised for failure. "Wake up!" was the warning to this church, and to all who lapse into spiritual lethargy today.

¹ Johnson, Alan F. "Revelation," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12. Frank E. Gaebelin, Editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 447.

² Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*. Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1965, pp. 113-114.

³ Blaiklock, p. 114.

⁴ Johnson, pp. 447-448.

⁵ Blaiklock, R. M. and Harrison, R. K., Editors. *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983, p. 399.

⁶ Unger, Merrill F. *Archaeology and the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962, p. 282.

⁷ Blaiklock and Harrison, p. 399.

⁸ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 16.6.6 (171).

⁹ Blaiklock and Harrison, p. 399.