

The Gospel in Ephesus

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Passage: “And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul...And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled” (Acts 19:11-17, ESV).

Purpose Statement: Understand how the message of Jesus spread among Jews and Gentiles in the city of Ephesus, and reconstruct the situation that would have led Paul to write his letter to the Ephesians.

Introduction: Archaeologists have been working on the site of ancient Ephesus, located in the Southwest corner of present-day Turkey, since the mid-nineteenth century. The first major excavations were conducted by British engineer John Turtle Wood, who was searching for the remains of the Temple of Artemis. Wood succeeded in finding the temple in 1869, and he spent the next five years excavating the site. Since the late 19th century, archaeologists have uncovered vast material from Ephesus, including temples, theaters, a library, fountains, bathhouses, and shops. Over thirty-five hundred inscriptions have been discovered in the city, most of which date from the Roman period and provide insight into the city's political, social, religious, and cultural life.

The ancient city of Ephesus was the greatest commercial city (and capital) of Asia Minor.¹ It became the seat of the Roman administration of the province of Asia during the rule of Augustus, at which time “the city experienced substantial growth, benefiting economically from the *Pax Romana* (Peace of Rome).”² With an estimated population of a quarter million, Ephesus ranked only behind Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch in size. It was located on a natural port and had a thriving harbor. It was “a free city [that] had been granted by Rome the right of self-government.”³ According to Josephus, there was a significant settlement of Jews at Ephesus.⁴

The citizens of Ephesus worshipped a variety of gods. The imperial cult bestowed emperors with honors similar to those given to the gods by their grateful subjects. “Temples were built to the emperors Claudius, Hadrian, and Severus,” and the Temple of Artemis was one of the Seven

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 355.

² David Seal, “Ephesus,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

³ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 67.

⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.225–27; 16.162–68, 172–273.

Wonders of the Ancient World.⁵ Artemis was a goddess worshiped throughout the ancient Greek world. In Ephesus, her cult was associated with an Asiatic fertility goddess, and “her sphere was the uncultivated earth, the forests, and the hills.”⁶

The Temple of Artemis “in Ephesus had become a tourist attraction and an economic asset” to “silversmiths who made little models of the temple for tourists and pilgrims.”⁷ As is evident in Luke’s account of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, “the city would vigorously defend the goddess against impious detractors.”⁸

Ephesus also had a reputation as a center of magical practice in the Mediterranean world. This was perpetuated by the so-called “Ephesian Letters” (*Ephesia Grammata*).⁹ The practice of magic in Ephesus was especially popular among the poor and uneducated.¹⁰ Magic in Hellenistic thought was a belief in a spirit world that influenced every aspect of life. The spirits were considered the cause of sickness, plagues, and disease.

Body:

- I. Paul began his ministry in Ephesus with Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18-28).
 - a. Paul traveled from Corinth to Ephesus with Priscilla and Aquila (18:18-19).
 - i. Paul sailed with them across the Aegean from Cenchreae on his way to Syria (Antioch) and Judaea (Jerusalem).
 - ii. Priscilla and Aquila seem settled down in Ephesus for a few years.
 - iii. Paul frequented the Jewish synagogue¹¹ briefly before continuing on his journey to Syria and Judaea.
 - b. Paul was received favorably by Jews in Ephesus (18:20-21).

⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 67.

⁶ Moisés Silva and Merrill Chapin Tenney, *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, A-C* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 2009), 375.

⁷ Moisés Silva and Merrill Chapin Tenney, *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, A-C* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 2009), 376.

⁸ Richard E. Oster Jr., “Ephesus (Place),” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 548.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 370.

¹⁰ David Seal, “Ephesus,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

¹¹ The Jewish synagogue at Ephesus has not yet been discovered by archaeologists. Inscriptions confirming the presence of Jews in Ephesus have been found, however. Furthermore, Josephus confirms the presence of Jews in Ephesus.

- i. The Jews frequenting the synagogue were interested in hearing Paul and asked him to stay longer, but he was unable to do so.
 - ii. He bade them farewell and promised, “if God wills,” to come back and spend more time with them.
 - c. Before returning to Ephesus, Paul visited disciples in Caesarea (the main Mediterranean port of Palestine), Jerusalem, Antioch, and the Galatian and Phrygian regions (18:22-23).
 - i. Paul and Silas had previously journeyed through the same region in Asia (16:6).
 - ii. Once again, they passed through Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, “strengthening all the disciples” (18:23).
 - d. An interval in the narrative describes the ministry of Apollos in Ephesus and then in Corinth (18:24-28).
 - i. Apollos spoke of Jesus in the synagogue in Ephesus and was noticed by Priscilla and Aquila, who “took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (18:26).
 - ii. Priscilla and Aquila seem to have continued to frequent the synagogue in Ephesus after Paul’s hasty departure.
 - e. The narrative of Paul’s journey explains that “while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul [finally] ... came [back] to Ephesus” (19:1), having traveled about 1,500 miles from the time he “set sail from Ephesus” (18:21).¹²
- II. Paul spent approximately three years ministering in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-41; cf 20:31).¹³
- a. When Paul arrived in Ephesus, “he found [twelve] disciples” of Jesus who were for the first time “baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” after being taught about the Holy Spirit (19:1c-7).
 - b. From the synagogue to the “hall of Tyrannus,” Paul continued preaching “the word of the Lord, [to] both Jews and Greeks” (19:8-10).

¹² Luke concisely summarizes Paul’s travels from Corinth, to Ephesus, to Caesarea, to Jerusalem, to Antioch (in Syria), to Galatia and Phrygia, and then back to Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19, 22-23; 19:1).

¹³ Paul spent at least two years teaching daily in the hall of Tyrannus (19:10). Also, he had spent at least three months teaching in the Jewish synagogue of Ephesus (19:8). When you add the events following the disturbance caused by Demetrius the silversmith (19:21-41), there seems to be harmony with the statement Luke records Paul make in his final address to the Ephesians indicating a period of three years of ministry in Ephesus (20:31). This may have taken place from the fall of 52 to the summer of 55.

- i. After three months of speaking boldly about Jesus in the synagogue, the doors finally closed “because some became stubborn and continued in unbelief” (19:9).
- ii. “Tyrannus may have been a Greek rhetorician living in Ephesus at that time, having his own private lecture hall.”¹⁴
- iii. “It is possibly from these public lectures that Paul gained the friendship of the highly placed officials called Asiarchs (Acts 19:31), who warned him of danger.”¹⁵
- c. News of God’s “extraordinary miracles [performed] by the hands of Paul” “became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks...So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (19:11-20).
 - i. Seven sons of a Jewish exorcist named Sceva attempted unsuccessfully to use Jesus’ name to cast out a demon (19:13–17).
 - ii. Newly converted Christians burned their magical books in the town of Ephesus (19:18–20).
- d. Another interval mentions Paul’s plan to pass through Macedonia and Achaia on his way to back Jerusalem, and then go to Rome and Spain (19:21-22; cf Rom 15:22-26).
- e. Paul’s remarkable success in Ephesus resulted in a “disturbance” instigated by “a man named Demetrius” (19:23-41).
 - i. Demetrius, “a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis,” made a living by selling these shrines and must have noticed a drop in demand (19:23).
 - ii. Demetrius’ words to his fellow tradesmen give insight into Paul’s success in the region, as he notes that “not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods” (19:26).
 - iii. The disturbance and hostility they promoted against Paul sprang from a fear that “this trade of ours may come into disrepute” (19:27).

¹⁴ Moisés Silva and Merrill Chapin Tenney, *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, Q-Z* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 2009), 955.

¹⁵ Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Tyrannus (Person),” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 686.

- iv. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul mentions his trials “experienced in Asia” (2 Cor 1:8-11).
 - v. Paul summarizes his three years in Ephesus as a period in which “a wide effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Cor 16:8-9).
- III. Paul’s ministry in Ephesus resulted in successful missionary activity in neighboring cities in Asia, “so that all the residents in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10).¹⁶
- a. It may have been during these years in Ephesus that Paul’s colleague Epaphras evangelized the cities of the Lycus valley—Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (Col 1:7–8; 2:1; 4:12–13).¹⁷
 - b. “During this period Paul’s co-workers seem to have established churches in the Asian cities of Pergamum, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Thyatira, and in the western interior of Asia Minor in the Lycus valley, in the towns of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae.”¹⁸
 - c. Writing his correspondence with the Corinthians from Ephesus, Paul references a greeting from “the churches of Asia” (1 Cor 15:32; 16:8, 19).
 - d. Paul references the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis in his letter to the Colossians (Col 2:1; 4:12-16).
 - e. During this time, Paul may have met Philemon and his wife Apphia, residents of Colossae, and taught them about Jesus (Philem 1-2, 17).
- IV. On his way back to Jerusalem with the contribution he had collected in the churches of Macedonia and Greece, Paul spent several days in Miletus (thirty miles south of Ephesus) with the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:16-38).
- a. As he addresses the Ephesian leaders, Paul implies that “his opponents in the province of Asia had tried to prejudice his converts’ minds against him in his absence.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Ephesus became a new center for the Gentile mission, next in importance after Antioch.

¹⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 366.

¹⁸ N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 2019), 452.

¹⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 388.

- b. He reminds them that he “did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (20:20–21).
 - c. He tells them that they will not “see my face again” (20:25).
 - d. Anticipating that the Ephesian church will be preyed upon by false teachers in his absence, Paul exhorted them to “pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God...” (20:28).
 - e. Then he predicts that “after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (20:29).
- V. Information about the state of the church in Ephesus after Paul’s departure is scarce in other New Testament writings, but some clues are present in Paul’s correspondence with Timothy and in the book of Revelation (1 Tim 1:3; 2 Tim 1:18; 4:12; Rev 2:1-7).
- a. Paul’s first letter to Timothy is believed to have been addressed to Timothy in his pastoral work at Ephesus.²⁰
 - i. After Paul left Ephesus for Macedonia (Acts 20:1), he arrived in Greece and stayed for three months (20:2).
 - ii. Timothy had been sent to Macedonia while Paul was in Ephesus (19:22).
 - iii. At some point, Timothy must have returned to Ephesus because Paul urged him to stay in Ephesus as he left for Macedonia in order to “charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine” (1 Tim 1:3).
 - iv. These false teachers, according to Paul, “have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law” (1 Tim 1:6-7).
 - b. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of a defection of his followers in Asia, perhaps alluding to opposition to his gospel that emerged in Ephesus (2 Tim 1:15).
 - i. In contrast, Paul references a Christian named Onesiphorus, who seems to have been in Ephesus during Paul’s three-year stay there (2 Tim 3:16-18).

²⁰ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 107.

- ii. Also in this same letter, Paul refers to Tychicus, a Christian from Asia Minor who was sent to Ephesus (2 Tim 4:12; cf Eph 6:21) and Colossae (Col 4:7) and who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4; cf 21:6).
- c. John was exiled to the island of Patmos off the coast of the western peninsula of Asia (just to the southwest of Ephesus).
 - i. The consensus of 2nd-century sources is in favor of placing John in Ephesus in his latter years.²¹
 - ii. In Jesus' message to the church in Ephesus, "the church is praised for its orthodoxy, chided for its failure to love, and challenged to repent and return to its original high ground."²²
 - iii. Jesus warns the Ephesians of "those who call themselves apostles and are not" (Rev 2:2), which aligns with Paul's previous warning that "fierce wolves would come in among you, not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29).

Conclusion: Paul visited Ephesus for the first time toward the end of his second missionary journey. The message of Jesus spread in Ephesus through Paul's initial efforts and as a result of the work of Aquila and Priscilla. During Paul's third missionary journey, the city became the place of his longest missionary tenure recorded in Acts. As a result of Paul's success in Ephesus, the city became the base of his operation (and that of his associates) as the message about Jesus was taken to the adjacent cities and regions of Asia Minor (e.g., the Lycus valley) by missionaries like Epaphras (Col 1:7; 4:12-13).²³

According to Luke, the growth of the church happened among "both Jews and Greeks." Paul was undertaking the enormous task of disciplining former pagans in a new way of life and integrating them among Jewish believers. After he left, he ministered and provided pastoral support to the congregation he founded in Ephesus and the surrounding Christian groups in the region through letters addressed to the Ephesians, Colossians, Laodiceans, and Philemon. Paul's goal in writing to the Ephesians was to help these new Christians navigate the various challenges confronting them in their new lives as followers of Jesus.

²¹ Richard E. Oster Jr., "Ephesus (Place)," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 549.

²² Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 66.

²³ Richard E. Oster Jr., "Ephesus (Place)," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 548.