

BY JOHN POLHILL

N PAUL'S DAY EPHESUS was the most important city in the Roman province of Asia (the western Aegean region of modern Turkey). For the eastern Mediterranean area, it ranked highest in influence, along with Syrian Antioch and Alexandria, Egypt. Paul's missionary strategy was to establish himself in a major city and reach out into the surrounding areas with the help of his co-workers. For his third major mission (Acts 19:1–20:38), Ephesus was the city.

History and Influence

Early Ephesus—Situated at the point where the Cayster River, a major watershed of Asia Minor, flowed into the Aegean Sea, Ephesus was at an important location for travel and commerce. It seems to have been settled as far back as the second millennium BC. The original Lydian population was largely displaced in 1044 BC by a migration from mainland Greece;

Right: Portrait of Alexander the Great, who is depicted as wearing the lion's pelt, a common iconographic feature in depictions of the young king on coins, which hints at his descent from the mythical hero Herakles. The letters on Alexander's face were carved at a later period; dated to about 300 BC; found at Kerameikos, which is northwest of the Acropolis in Athens, Greece. In 334 BC, Alexander the Great overcame the Persians in the region and took control of Ephesus.

Below: Cayster River, which flows westward toward the Aegean Sea.

Bottom: Theater in Ephesus; the harbor, which has since silted up, was in the distance.







they brought with them their culture and language. Other Greek cities sprang up nearby, and the region became known as Ionia.

Ephesus flourished under the Greeks, making it the target of many would-be empire builders. One of the first to take possession of it was Croesus, the King of Lydia from 560-546 BC. He had enormous wealth and was probably the prototype of the Midas legends. Next to subjugate Ephesus was Cyrus of Persia. In turn Alexander the Great in 334 BC drove the Persians from Ephesus. Upon Alexander's death, his empire was divided among four of his generals-Seleucus over the Syrian area; Ptolemy over Egypt; Cassander over Macedonia and parts of Greece and Thrace; and Lysimachus over the western areas, including Ephesus. Lysimachus is significant for moving the city to higher ground from a region subject to flooding. This higher site was its location in Paul's day.

Under the Romans—For a period, the Seleucid kings ruled over Ephesus, but the Romans defeated them in 190 BC. The Romans first entrusted

Ephesus to a client king, Eumenes of Pergamum, who is famous for having built the finest library in Asia and having erected the impressive altar of Zeus that now stands in a Berlin museum. In 133 BC, the last Pergamese king, Attalus III, bequeathed his kingdom, including Ephesus, back to the Romans. During the Roman civil war, Marc Antony captured Ephesus in 41 BC. He lived there for a while with Cleopatra, the last of the Egyptian Ptolemaic rulers.

Many of the structures Paul would have seen in Ephesus were built during the Roman period. These included the bathhouse and the state agora. The most renowned of the public structures was the Temple of Artemis. It dated back many centuries and honored an ancient mother goddess who the people believed to be the provider of the earth's fertility. Probably some sort of veneration of this goddess was present in the earliest settlements of the region. When the Greeks arrived, they changed the name of the goddess to one of their own deities-Artemis (the Roman Diana), virgin goddess of the hunt and of childbirth. The name

changed, but the fertility association remained. As late as Paul's day, images of her depicted a multi-breasted female. The Artemis Temple that Paul saw had been completed in 334 BC. Measuring 230 feet wide and 425 feet long, it was adorned with statues, paintings, and gold leaf; it had over 100 columns that stood 60 feet tall. Known throughout the Roman Empire, this was one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

The City's Influence—In Paul's day Ephesus had considerable influence on many levels. For one, it was a major commercial center. The Cayster River provided access to the sea. It often silted over at its mouth but was periodically dredged. It was considered the best harbor in the province of Asia for heavier vessels. Excellent roads linked the major cities of the province, including some that crossed the mountainous areas and led to the cities of Syria and beyond. Paul himself traveled the latter routes in coming from Syrian Antioch on his third missionary journey. Ephesus was also the banking center for the entire province. Greek temples often served as major depositing centers, and the Temple of Artemis reportedly held the greatest deposits of them all. Paul seems to have supported himself during his time in Ephesus (Acts 20:34-35). He would have found ample opportunity for practicing his tent-making trade in the busy commercial setting of Ephesus.

Ephesus was a major religious center. Artemis worship was popular throughout the Roman Empire, and the Ephesian temple was the undisputed center of her veneration. A whole month in the spring was dedicated to the goddess with a wide array of special events. People would come from all over the empire to participate. Paul would surely have seized this as an opportunity to bear witness to the one true God, much as he had done in pointing out the folly of idolatry to the philosophers of Athens (17:22-31).

Ephesus was also a major political center. When the last king of Pergamum willed his lands to Rome

in 133 BC, the Romans established the province of Asia and made Pergamum its capital. Sometime in the first century AD, the capital of Asia was moved to Ephesus. Whether this occurred before Paul was there is unclear, but history clearly shows that Ephesus held considerable political influence. The best evidence is that in Asia the Romans erected in Ephesus the shrine for veneration of the emperor. The officials over the shrine were called Asiarchs. Acts 19:31 relates how these officials were Paul's friends who sought to prevent him from being harmed by an angry mob. I

Ephesus In the New Testament

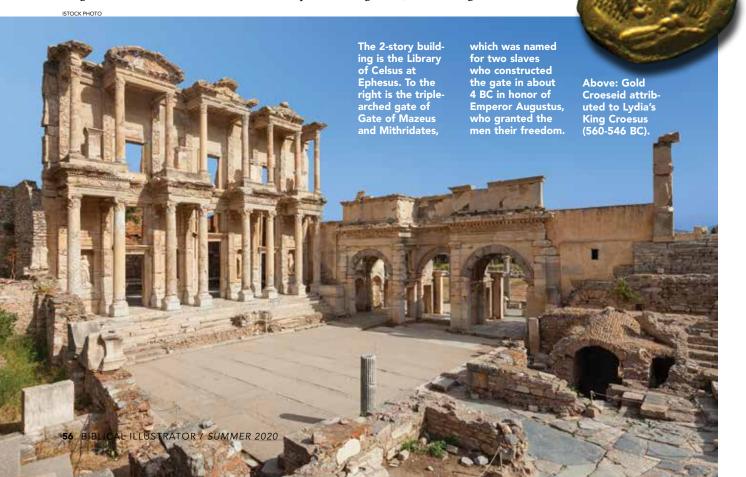
Paul and Ephesus—Paul had his eye on a mission to Ephesus ("Asia") as early as his second missionary journey, but the Holy Spirit led him elsewhere (16:6-10). At the end of that journey, however, Paul established work in Ephesus, staying only briefly himself but leaving Priscilla and Aquila in charge (18:19-21). During his

third missionary period he worked primarily in Ephesus (19:1-41).

Acts 19:8-10 provides a summary of Paul's Ephesian ministry. As was his usual pattern, Paul witnessed first in the Jewish synagogue, but opposition arose and forced him to move to a secular lecture hall. This ministry lasted two years. Paul's "farewell address" to the Ephesian elders at the end of his third missionary journey speaks of "three years" (20:31). In any event, his two to three years in Ephesus was the longest stay Paul had in any city according to the New Testament accounts. During that period "all the residents of Asia" heard the gospel (19:10).

Here Paul was following a pattern of establishing himself in a major city and working from there into the neighboring cities and countryside through his co-workers. An example of this is indicated

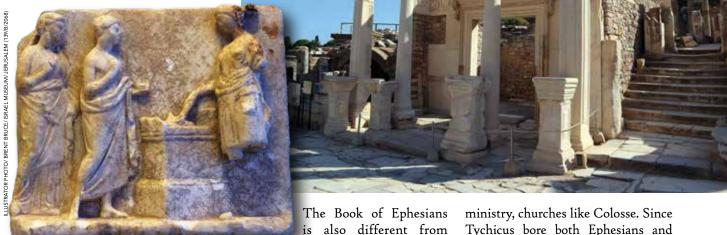
in Paul's letter to the church at



Below: The relief depicts a couple facing the goddess Artemis, who lights a fire on the altar. The relief was likely dedicated to Artemis, goddess of childbirth, by a barren couple who were seeking

her assistance and brought this carved relief as an offering; marble; Hellenistic era.

Right: At Ephesus, remains of the temple honoring Hadrian, who was emperor AD 117-138.



other Pauline letters in its

Colossae, a congregation that was a product of the apostle's Ephesian Paul indicated ministry. Colossians had never met him face to face (Col. 2:1-5). Epaphras was the one who established the church and kept Paul informed about its progress (1:7-8). Paul considered the Colossian church a fruit of his ministry and felt free to write them a letter addressing their problems. Through a network of co-workers like Epaphras, Paul's Ephesian ministry reached all Asia.

Ephesians and Ephesus—What is the relationship of Paul to the Book of Ephesians? The answer seems obvious-Paul wrote the letter of that name to the Christians of Ephesus. The answer is not that simple, however. The earliest copies of the letter that we have, ones that come from the second and third centuries AD, have no place name in the address. They simply read "to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus." By the fourth century, manuscripts added "to the saints in Ephesus."

almost total lack of references to people and matters in the church. The common mention of co-workers like Timothy is lacking in the address, no greetings stand at the end, and Paul made no mention of particular problems in the church. The only specific reference is to the bearer of the letter, Tychicus (Eph. 6:21). Paul did state Tychicus was the bearer of Colossians (Col. 4:7), a letter that

contains a considerable amount of

duplicate material with Ephesians.

A plausible solution to this problem views Ephesians as a circular letter that contains general teachings rather than material specific to a single congregation. A later generation felt the need for an address and knew that Ephesus had long had an association with the letter. They thus added Ephesus as the recipient. Ephesus would have been the leading church in the circuit of churches for whom Paul originally intended the letter. That circuit would be the churches established during Paul's Ephesian Tychicus bore both Ephesians and Colossians, Ephesians may have possibly been the Laodicean letter (now otherwise unknown) for which Paul asked the Colossians to make an exchange (Col. 4:16).3

Paul wrote Ephesians from prison (Eph. 3:1). No longer able in person to challenge his churches with his vision of their unity in Christ, he could still communicate through his letters. He accomplished this quintessentially in what we now know as the Book of Ephesians. It is a message not just for a single congregation of a single time, but for all Christians of every age.

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^{1.} The above material is drawn from the following source: John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 394-95. See especially footnote 1 on 395.

^{2.} All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

^{3.} John B. Polhill, Paul and His Letters (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 355.