

Ephesus

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Marble Street at Ephesus. To the left is the agora. The upper right is the grand theater.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ MARK DUNN (226/0986)

BY JOHN POLHILL

IN PAUL'S DAY EPHEBUS 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.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / G. B. HOWELL / ATHENS ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (35/7/81)



DSDWNY / CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-SHARE ALIKE 3.0 UNPORTED LICENSE



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / MARK DUNN (225/0468)

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.¹

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”² (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).

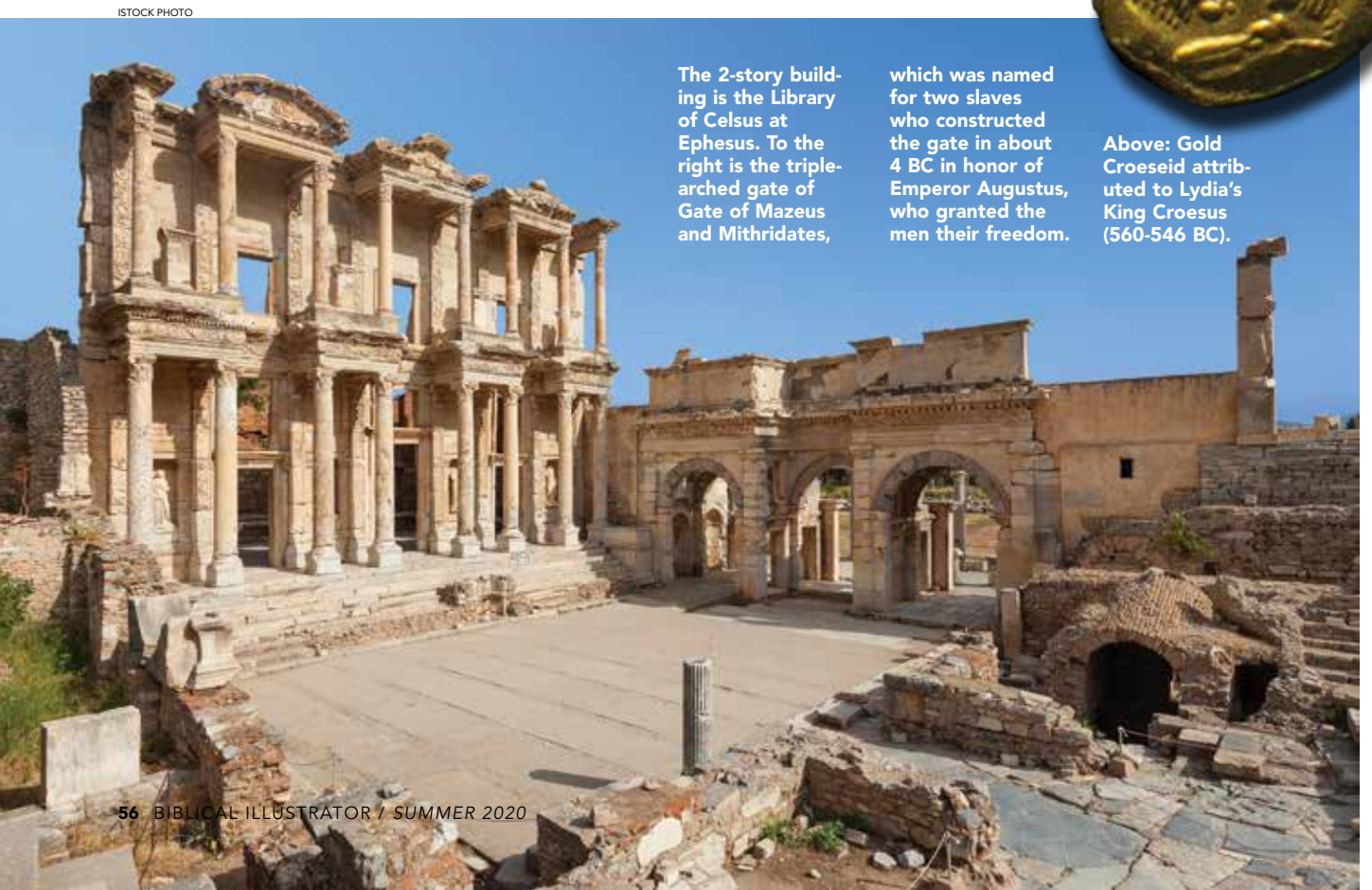
Here Paul was following a pattern of establishing himself in a major city and working from there into the neighboring cities and countryside through his co-workers. An example of this is indicated in Paul's letter to the church at



Above: Gold Croeseid attributed to Lydia's King Croesus (560-546 BC).

The 2-story building is the Library of Celsus at Ephesus. To the right is the triple-arched gate of Gate of Mazeus and Mithridates,

which was named for two slaves who constructed the gate in about 4 BC in honor of Emperor Augustus, who granted the men their freedom.



ISTOCK PHOTO

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / BRITISH MUSEUM / LONDON (31/24/58)

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.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ MARK DUNN (225/0331)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ ISRAEL MUSEUM/ JERUSALEM (13916/2068)

Colossae, a congregation that was a product of the apostle's Ephesian ministry. Paul indicated the 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.”

The Book of Ephesians is also different from other Pauline letters in its 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

ministry, churches like Colosse. Since 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. 📖

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.

John Polhill is professor of New Testament, retired, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.