



The Seven Churches: Ephesus

The Location, Geography, and Topography

Ephesus was located in Asia Minor, about three miles from the western coast. It was situated near the mouth of the Cayster River with a large, artificial harbor that was accessible to the largest of ships. The city was situated at the head of a great valley formed between the base of the two hills, Prion and Coressus. The valley reached far into Asia Minor and connected Ephesus, by highways, to the other major cities.

The climate was exceptionally agreeable and the valley's soil extremely fertile. Part of the reason for the fertility of the soil was the high moisture content. Much of the land was somewhat swamp-like in nature. This advantage became a

disadvantage as well. The great Temple of Diana (by the first century, rebuilt at least seven times) needed to be built on huge substructures because of the land. Silt also slowly built up at the head of the artificial harbor, which at one time could handle even the largest of ships. Because of the build-up of soil and silt, by the time of the Crusades, the city was about three miles from the water.

The Politics and Economy

Ephesus was an Asian city, but was always greatly influenced by other cultures. At various times it was controlled by Carians, Leleges, Ionians, Lydians, and finally in 557 BC, by the Persians. For years, the Persians and Greeks disputed possession with Alexander the Great finally taking it. After passing through the hands of Lysimachus and others, it was bequeathed to the Romans. In 190, when the Roman province of Asia was formed, Ephesus was one of the two principal cities, Pergamum being the other (and the capital).

The wealth in Ephesus allowed the building of many splendid buildings, shrines, and other monuments. The city was home to many baths, gymnasia, and stadia. It was also the location of the largest theatre known, which by some estimates would seat 50,000 spectators. By AD 135, the Library of Celsus was complete.

Economics, politics, and religion greatly overlapped in Ephesus. The wealth and commercial success was due not only to the ease of land and sea access, but in no small part to the Temple of Diana. Ephesus became a great manufactory of images and portable shrines (see **Acts 19:23-27**). The temple itself is considered as one of the wonders of the ancient world because of the size and grandeur. Pilgrims from all over the world brought their wealth here and the priests became bankers of enormous revenues. The temple organization became the owners of vast and valuable lands and even controlled the fisheries of Ephesus. The building was a museum as well, housing all manner of statuary

and paintings. It also became a refuge for criminals in that no one could be arrested for any crime within a bowshot of the walls.

Wealth and economic power do not last, especially here at Ephesus. Just as the silversmith had predicted, business suffered as worship of their goddess, Diana, declined. In fact, when the temple burned again in AD 246, it was never restored or rebuilt. By the tenth century, the grandeur and splendor of Ephesus was gone. The city no longer even bore the name and the inhabitants saw no harbor nor had recollection of a temple.

The Religious Background

The first century in Ephesus saw the worship of many Greco-Roman gods and goddesses as well as those from other cultures. There were temples and monuments for the worship of the Nymphs and other lesser “deities,” like Hercules, as well. As was customary in most important cities of the Roman Empire, the emperors themselves were quite fond of building temples; buildings by Hadrian and Domitian are prime examples. Near the agora, was the Temple of Serapis, built by Egyptians who had close ties with Ephesus through the great Egyptian city of Alexandria. There was also a significant Jewish presence in Ephesus at this time.

All other religions in Ephesus paled before the intensity of the worship of Artemis Diana. Ephesus was known as the *neokoros* or guardian of the temple and worship of Artemis (**Acts 19:35**). This was partially because of the legends that had grown up around Ephesus of the image that fell from the sky in even more ancient times. Peoples from an earlier time had worshipped in the area their own goddess of fertility that they associated with something from the sky, probably a meteor. Through the years, this had morphed and combined with Greek influences into the worship of Diana, suggesting that the great image of Diana in the temple was a direct gift from Zeus.

The worship of Artemis drove not only religious life, but political and economic life as well. Read **Acts 19** to get a fuller idea of the influence of this religion in the area and how it had to be dealt with by early Christians.

A Letter to the Church at Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)

Consider, first of all, the *history* of this church. We know of the beginning of the church (**Acts 19:1-12**). Paul preached much at Ephesus (**Acts 20:17-31**). The letter to the **Ephesians**—the great treatise on Christ and His church—was sent to the church at Ephesus.

Consider *Christ’s description of Himself* (**Revelation 2:1**). As in each letter, Christ here describes Himself in such a way as to show He is qualified to say what needs to be said. He holds in His hand the seven stars or the messengers to the church. He was the source of their guidance, hope, and destiny. Truly, He has the whole world in His hand. He also walked in the midst of the churches. He *knew* them! He knew what was right and what was wrong with them. Furthermore, He was in their midst—near. This enabled Him to know all (**John 2:24,25; Hebrews 4:13**).

Consider *the good* which Jesus knew about them (**Revelation 2:2,3**). He knew their labor. They had a good example (**Acts 20:20; 19:10**). He knew their patience or steadfastness. This is explained in verse 3. That is expected (**1Corinthians 15:58; Acts 2:42**). Christians must excel in this (**James 1:2-6**). He also knew their attitude toward sin. No doubt, as they had the same teacher, they had been taught as the Corinthians had (**1Corinthians 4:6,7**). He knew their attitude toward the doctrine of Christ. Every church must stand foursquare for the truth (**John 8:32; James 2:10; Galatians 1:6-9; 2Timothy 3:16,17**).

Consider *the bad* which Jesus knew about this church (**Revelation 2:4**). Notice, also, how love is equated with works here (**Revelation 2:5**). The evidence or proof of love is in obedience—works (**1John 2:4,5**). What a shame! The church had so much to their credit—all of this good and yet spoiled by one thing. We leave them in a condemned condition.

Finally, consider *the requirements* (**Revelation 2:5**) and consider *the promise*. (**Revelation 2:5,7**).

Let us all learn from the first-century Christians in Ephesus. Remember, they were as real as you and I.