

Insights from Ephesus

By [Jonathan K. Corrado, PhD](#)

Introduction

The Bible is recognized as an inspired record of mankind's search for existence, significance, and moral guidance by nearly all Christian faiths and also by the Jewish population, in the case of the Tanakh (Old Testament). Interestingly, Muslims also hold portions of the Old Testament in high regard, granted these are secondary to the Qur'an. Even secular, non-Christian scholars have conveyed reverence for the Bible's content.

There are, however, many that vehemently dispute the scriptures as unsupported mythology and this opposition comes in many flavors. The truth is, however, there is ample science that supports the assertions and historicity of the Biblical claims. Archeology is one of these disciplines.

Archaeology has compelled many scholars to take the Bible much more seriously. It has influenced the culture and history of Israel and surrounding countries and frequently surprises researchers by the inherent accuracy of its accounts.

The New Testament describes several scenes and events that could be clarified or better understood by applying evidence and insights found via archeological means. The purpose of this article is to explore the archeology of the city of Ephesus and connect the evidence to the Apostle Paul's presence in that city as described in the New Testament. This article will consider four main aspects of the archeology of Ephesus, reinforcing the history as described in the Bible. The first aspect will be the riot in Ephesus described by Paul, the second will be the Temple of Artemis, the third will be the wealth and opulence of Ephesus in the context of the ancient world, and the fourth will be the stadium at Ephesus. These four aspects will all be linked to the picture of Ephesus painted by the New Testament. Finally, this article will reflect on the limits and contributions of archeology when it comes to enriching understanding of ancient Ephesus in light of the New Testament.

Riot at Ephesus

One of the most interesting links between the New Testament and the archeology of Ephesus consists of the riots at Ephesus described by Paul. In the

book of Acts, the silversmith Demetrius responds in the following manner to Paul's presence:

“Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth. Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands: So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth.” (Acts 19:24-26)

This inevitably led to a riot. The discussion of the riot would seem to be cloaked in religious language and spiritual underpinnings, but it was actually motivated by the economic interest of the silversmiths who were responsible for furnishing the temple. Demetrius expresses concern that the Christian God will replace Artemis, but the fundamental motivation for the riot clearly had to do with concern over the fact that if the Temple of Artemis fell into disrepute or neglect, then the silversmiths themselves would essentially be without a job.

The Temple of Artemis was discovered by archeologists in the late nineteenth century, and it is now considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. This is how the Biblical Archaeology Society has described the context of the riot at Ephesus in terms of what is known of the structure of the Temple of Artemis: "Demetrius alleged [that] Paul was harming the silversmith industry that made little shrines used as dedicatory offerings to Artemis and tarnishing the reputations of the Artemis cult at Ephesus."¹ According to the same source, this concern was unfounded, due to the fact that archaeologists found inscriptions from a later date that indicated that the silversmith industry in Ephesus was still doing well. However, the riot at Ephesus was nevertheless an important event in the New Testament, and it serves as a good example of the resistance faced by the early Christians.

Temple of Artemis

The economic concern of the silversmiths, although selfish, was certainly genuine. This can be gleaned from the sheer dimensions of the Temple of Artemis: "In antiquity, Ephesus was famed for its magnificent temple to Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The colossal temple was the size of a football field at 115 meters long and 46 meters wide, and has a vast 127

¹ Biblical Archaeology Society Staff. (2019, January 4). "Biblical riot at Ephesus: The archaeological context." Bible History Daily. Retrieved from <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/biblical-archaeology-places/biblical-riot-at-ephesus/>

Ionic columns supporting the massive structure."² This means that if the silversmiths made their living by building shrines for the temple, then they did indeed have a strong economic motivation to ensure the well-being of the temple; and if they perceived that Paul was going to bring about the downfall of the temple, then this could indeed have provoked a riot. In particular, the silversmiths built shrines for Artemis, whereas Paul openly declared that gods cannot be built by human hands and that the shrines built by the silversmiths were worthless. It is easy to understand how this could have been bad for business.

The archeology of the Temple of Artemis, though, also shows that the temple had been destroyed many times, and this may have relevance insofar as it may have caused the residents of Ephesus to question Artemis and thus become more open to Christianity. As Bohstrom States, "In the third century C.E., a severe earthquake rocked Ephesus and, compounding the city's sorrow, the riches of the temple of Artemis were plundered by seafaring Goths from the Black Sea, who then set the temple on fire. Again. As the Temple of Artemis had formed the high point of this invasion, the belief in the Great Goddess and her invincibility was profoundly shaken."³ Archeological evidence has revealed this history with great clarity, and the repeated destructions of the Temple of Artemis may have helped pave the way for Christian success after the time of Paul.

In this context, it is worth recalling that the pagan culture believed in gods of power, meaning that if gods were unable to demonstrate their power, then it became easy to question their legitimacy. Pagan gods were theoretically supposed to be able to protect their cities and their people in the material-political sense. This means that the destruction of the Temple of Artemis would have had great theological significance in the ancient world. It would have caused the residents of Ephesus to question whether they had, after all, picked the right deity to worship. In particular, Paul's assertion in Acts 19 may have resonated well in the aftermath of events such as the destruction of temples to pagan gods. The archeology of the Temple of Artemis thus supports theological conflicts and considerations that are clearly present in the New Testament's accounts of the city of Ephesus.

The Opulence of Ephesus

Archeological evidence also indicates why Ephesus was in fact such an important location in the New Testament era. As Bohstrom has written: "The Roman city of Ephesus was always known to be lavish. Now painstaking renovation of mosaics, murals, and other marvels in a sprawling apartment complex showcases its splendors in the era when the city on the Turkish coast

² Bohstrom, P. (2016, August 11). "Archaeologists unveil blazing mosaic from Apostle Paul-era Ephesus." Haaretz. Retrieved from <https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/1-900-year-old-mosaics-restored-in-ephesus-1.5423726>

³ Ibid

was visited by the Apostle Paul, nearly 2000 years ago.”⁴ The wealth and importance of Ephesus is important for understanding why Ephesus was such an important location in the New Testament era and in early Christianity. Nowadays, Ephesus is an ancient ruin. But at the time, it was one of the most important centers of the ancient world, and to gain influence in Ephesus would have been to gain influence across the ancient world. This helps justify why Paul and other apostles traveled to Ephesus in their mission to spread the Gospel.

The magnificence of Ephesus is also made evident by textual sources that is not archeological per se, but nevertheless support and reinforce the archeological findings: "The sanctity of the temple of Artemis (= Diana) assured safety to all who sought refuge within its walls. It was also thought that the power of the goddess protected money deposited there. Thus, the temple became 'the general bank of Asia'...Not surprisingly, it attracted the attention of those desperate for money but deprived of religious scruples.”⁵ There are historical accounts of the Temple of Artemis being robbed. This supports the implications of the economic role of the Temple of Artemis that have been discussed above. The temple's economic function is the impetus for the silversmith's riot against Paul, and that function is also supported by textual evidence (supporting the archeological evidence) regarding the nature and function of the temple.

As the Bible Archaeology Report suggests: "The archeological and inscriptional records show that it was a city of immense wealth, much of it tied to the cult of Artemis. The treasury in the Temple of Artemis was essentially the bank.”⁶ There are many evidences that confirm this point. It is worth noting that the picture of Ephesus as a place of great wealth, that is clearly expressed in the New Testament, aligns closely with the archeological and historical evidence. This adds credence to the Biblical claims surrounding Paul's writings about Ephesus and, consequently, adds confidence to the balance of the New Testament and, by extension, Bible as a whole. If the New Testament correctly records the standing of Ephesus as it has been corroborated by archeological means, then what basis is there for believing that other aspects of the Bible are farfetched? If the Bible were merely a work of fantasy, then one would expect the details about Ephesus to not correspond with reality. But, in reality, the archeological record indicates that the New Testament does provide valid historical information about ancient Ephesus.

The Stadium

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Murphy-O'Connor, J. (2008). St. Paul's Ephesus: Texts and archaeology. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

⁶ Bible Archaeology Report. (2017, November 6). "Evidence from Ephesus for the reliability of Scripture." Retrieved from <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2017/11/06/evidence-from-ephesus-for-the-reliability-of-scripture/>

Another interesting corroboration of the New Testament through the archeology of Ephesus relates to the stadium at Ephesus. This stadium has been uncovered by archeologists, and confirms Paul's account of the riot, where the rioters took Paul and his companions.⁷ Likewise, per 1 Corinthians 15:32, "If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not?" "Whether or not Paul is making a rhetorical argument here, he is basing it on the fact that there were public battles against wild beasts in Ephesus."⁸ Therefore, while Paul is making a theological point, he is also basing that point on actual events that he had witnessed while residing in Ephesus.

This is interesting for two reasons. The first is that it suggests that Paul reliably testified to the authenticity of Ephesus and what had transpired there. He indicated that he was taken to a stadium, and that stadium has been discovered. He also discusses fighting wild beasts, and this was the characteristic entertainment of the era that occurred in the stadium at Ephesus. Aside from providing valuable historical information that has been confirmed by archeology, the archeological evidence boosts the credibility and truthfulness of the rest of the Bible. This also ultimately provides confidence related to whether Paul's writings are truthful about other, more esoteric matters. Paul's accurate descriptions of Ephesus suggest that he was of sound mind, his claims were not contrived, and that he was capable of making and recording accurate observations.

Contributions and Limits

From the discussion above, two main points can be made about the contributions of archeology to the New Testament picture of ancient Ephesus. The first point is that the archeological evidence enriches the picture that is found in the New Testament. For example, the evidence makes it clear that the Temple of Artemis was quite profound and that it was indeed a major source of employment for the silversmiths of Ephesus. This means that the silversmith's motivation for the riot, seemingly instigated by Paul, was almost certainly legitimate and not merely contrived within the Biblical text. This is not to say that the Bible is incorrect in pointing to religious motivations and practicalities, because in fact in ancient Ephesus, the cult of Artemis was inseparable from the economy of the city. This is made clear in that the temple treasury essentially served as city bank. The archeological evidence therefore rounds out, reinforces, and enriches the picture of Ephesus found in the New Testament.

The second contribution is that the archeological evidence tends to bolster the general credibility of the Bible. This is because the evidence shows that Paul's observations regarding Ephesus were not fictional but, rather, were grounded in

⁷ G. Frederick Owen. 1964. "Archaeological Supplement: Ephesus" in The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible, KJV. B. B. Kirkwood Bible Co. Inc.: Indianapolis, IN. pp. 332.

⁸ Bible Archaeology Report. 2017. "Evidence from Ephesus for the reliability of Scripture."

confirmable characteristics of ancient Ephesus. As broached above, this is interesting from a theological standpoint because it raises questions about whether the more obscure aspects of the New Testament are likewise credible. For example, is Paul's reference to the stadium at Ephesus credible while his extraordinary account of meeting Christ on the road to Damascus not credible? The archeological support for various aspects of the Bible, like Paul in Ephesus, relegates the difficulty in making such insinuations, because it demonstrates that the New Testament is not merely a holy book, but is rooted in actual historical, verifiable fact.

A key limitation of archeological evidence, however, is that it cannot single handedly, comprehensively attest to the integrity of the entire Bible. By the nature of the discipline, archeologists have access to a small, single-dimensional data set, and consequently inferences drawn from the evidence are inevitably subject to error. As Chesterton (1993) has humorously suggested, for example, it is quite possible that cavemen did not really live-in caves, but that the caves were the only aspect of their culture that managed to survive long enough for archeologists to find them.⁹

Moreover, a second key limitation is that archeology cannot answer questions of faith and spirituality. Archeological evidence does confirm the historicity of many parts of the Bible, and it can therefore be argued that other aspects of the Bible may also be likewise credible. Archeological evidence bolsters the apologetics arguments in support of the reliability of the Biblical text, but faith and spirituality are a matter of the heart. Evidence and reason alone do not salvifically unite mankind to his creator: salvation is a transformative, life changing phenomenon of the heart, initiated by man's free will and galvanized by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Introduced in Deuteronomy 17:6 and echoed throughout the rest of the canon, the Bible institutes a principle that matters of testimony should be confirmed by "two or three witnesses." In accordance with Old Testament law, no person could be convicted of an offense without appropriately declared evidence from multiple witnesses.

When it comes to the truth of the Bible, an analogous principle is established from the discipline of archaeology as discussed throughout this paper. Per Psalm 85:11, "Truth shall spring out of the earth." The truth of the word has a unique foundation confirmed by "two or three" witnesses. It endures through time, and in His own timing, God asserts its truth.

⁹ Chesterton, G. K. (1993). *The everlasting man*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press.

According to that biblical principle of “two or three witnesses,” the archeological evidence supporting Paul’s assertions, in the context of Ephesus, was discussed in this paper that bolster the accuracy and truth of the Bible. To every extent, the evidence has been “springing out” and God has upheld the truthfulness of His Word and His Book must be taken seriously. His Book is exceptional in every way because it is His Book and His method of communicating with the Church, His prize and His bride.

In addition to active involvement in his local church, Dr. Corrado works in the nuclear industry, is a senior officer in the U.S. Naval Reserve, and is a creation scientist with Answers in Genesis. He is a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute (BS, Mechanical Engineering), Old Dominion University (Master of Engineering Management), Nations University (Master of Divinity), and Colorado State University (PhD, Systems Engineering). He has several fields of research interest including theology, nuclear engineering, systems engineering, and human performance/error, and has several technical publications in these fields. He is married to Erin and they have four children.

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