

The Problem of the Historical Context of Scripture

By Stephen Dray

This brief note is intended to highlight a neglected problem when Evangelicals and others appeal (as, of necessity, they must) to the historical and cultural context behind Scripture. One example is chosen to make establish the point: the city of Ephesus.

The extant knowledge of the ancient city of Ephesus is vast.ⁱ It is known that in the first century it was near the height of its importance.ⁱⁱ With a population of over 200,000, it was only lesser in size to Rome and Alexandria within the Roman Empire (and, probably, of greater importance than the latter)ⁱⁱⁱ claiming, with justification, to be “the first and greatest metropolis in Asia”.^{iv} Its size was matched by its economic prosperity,^v its political^{vi} and



Fig. iv) A coin from Ephesus showing the Temple of Artemis together with her image.

religious importance. The cult of Diana overshadowed the city’s life (as demonstrated by its presence on the coinage in Fig. iv) and established it as a centre of religious activity for the entire province.^{vii} The vast and lavishly adorned third temple of Diana^{viii} was recognised as

one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.^{ix} Conybere and Howsen comment that, “there was no religious building in the world in which was concentrated a greater amount of admiration, enthusiasm and superstition”.^x The activities associated with it often embraced the whole of Asia. Thus the Artemisia festival was pre-eminent in the province^{xixii} and the later annual feast on the 6th of Thargelion fostered devotion for the goddess of the ‘temple of Asia’ who was widely worshipped elsewhere.^{xiii} By the first century the worship of Diana drew pilgrims from across the ancient world and was itself the city’s major source of income: supporting a huge tourist industry.^{xiv}



Fig. i) The god Bes with his outrageously enlarged penis

Yet interpreting the available evidence is difficult. An example of this might be the discovery of the terracotta image of Bes with his outrageously enlarged penis (fig. i) or the graffiti discovered in Marble Street (fig. ii) sometimes seen as a signpost to the local brothel.

Both these have been viewed as evidence that the city was a centre of prostitution that was dignified by being given a religious status;^{xv} but this view is by no means established.^{xvi}



Fig ii) Graffiti in Marble Street

Other problems are still more complex. In view of the significance of the cult of Artemis in ancient Ephesus^{xvii} and its probable furnishing the most significant historical context for, for example, 1 Timothy, little evidence exists of the nature of the sacrifices, rituals or the cult personnel in the first century.^{xviii}

Difficulties also exist as to determining the character of Artemis. Of her origins there is little debate: originally a deity of the Lydians, she may be compared to the Great Mistress of the Animals found elsewhere in Phrygia, and, as such, she was one of the many forms of

the ubiquitous mother and fertility goddess. As such she was the protectress of all forms of

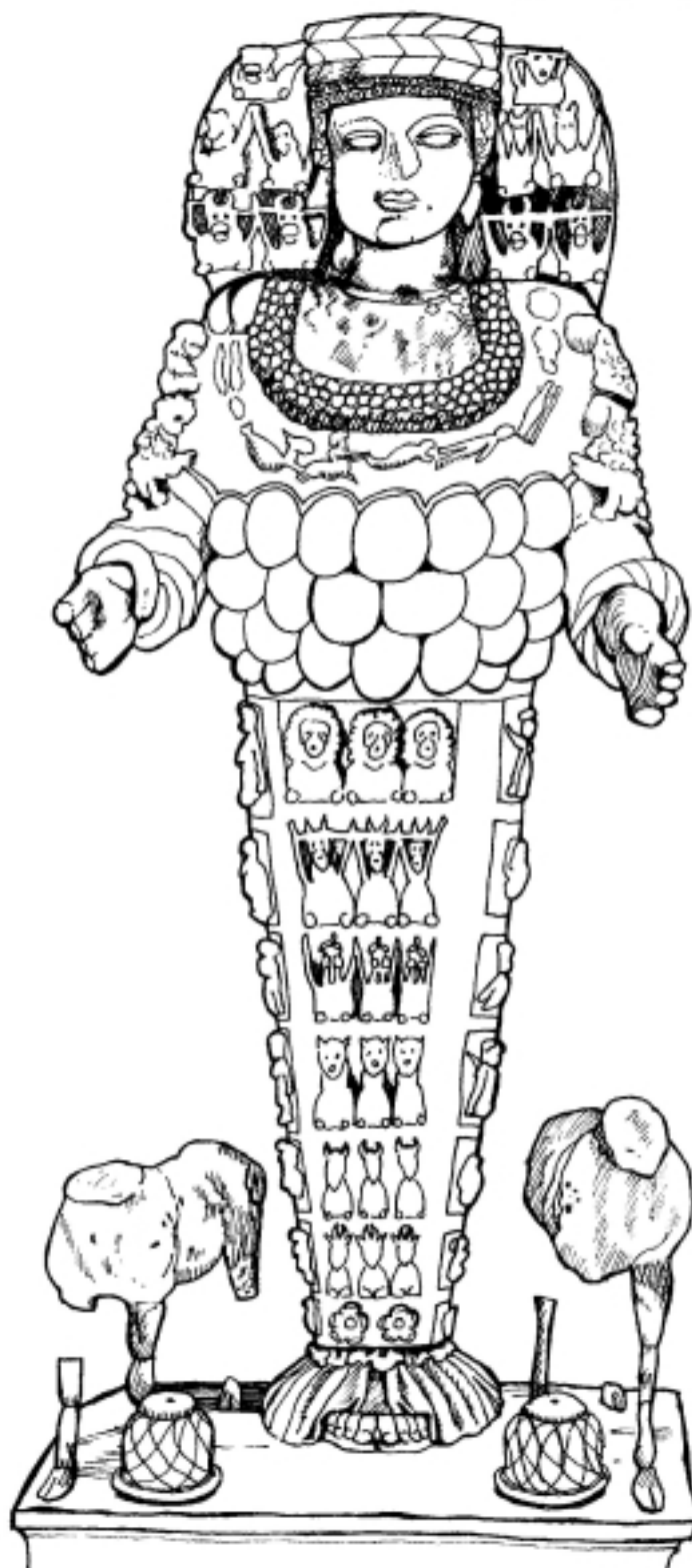


Fig iii) Artemis of the Ephesians

new life and the patroness of childbirth.^{xix} However, of her first-century character there is considerable debate. Thus some argue that she “never became a truly Greek goddess” and retained the earlier characteristics.^{xx} Evidence for this is seen in the representations of the Ephesian Artemis with legs fused together in the form of a pillar (see fig. iii) that are unlike traditional Greek representations of the goddess and the rows of round objects across the goddess’ chest, variously interpreted as eggs, multiple breasts, dates or the testicles of bulls sacrificed to the goddess: all of which seems unsuited to the Greek-inspired virgin huntress.^{xxi} Further, the fact that the priests were apparently “utterly strange to any Greek hierarchy”^{xxii} suggests to many that “There can be no doubt that the ritual was of an orgiastic type, accompanied with ceremonial prostitution and other abominations” and that the Greeks “never succeeded in really affecting the cultus.”^{xxiii} However, others believe that in the Empire the cult was brought into conformity with Hellenistic and Roman ideals^{xxiv} and still others suggest that a more nuanced reading of the evidence within the framework of the known first-century world-view may assist toward the resolution of the apparent ambiguities of the evidence.^{xxv}

Such problems could be multiplied for Ephesus and elsewhere. The moral, however, is this. While exploration of the historical and cultural context is a vital necessity for biblical exegesis, reconstructions need to be offered tentatively. For all the extent of the data, it is partial, skewed and subject to significant lacunae. Study undertaken by the present author suggests that, all too often, tentative reconstructions are cited as fact, become procrustean

interpretative beds and obscure rather than illuminate the text and foster division rather than engender charity.

ⁱ Compare the comprehensive bibliography of R. Oster, *A Bibliography of Ancient Ephesus* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1987).

ⁱⁱ E. Akurgal, *Ancient Civilisations and Ruins of Turkey* (Istanbul: Hasat Kitabevi, 1983), 143, suggests that the apogee of Ephesus' greatness occurred during the following century. D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton: University Press, 1950), 583, notes that growth of prosperity was especially apparent in the second half of the first century A.D.

ⁱⁱⁱ See P. Trebilco, "Asia," in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, vol. 2, eds. D.W. Gill and C. Gempf (Carlisle, Paternoster, 1994) 307; W. Ramsay, "Ephesus," in HDB, vol. 2, 721; G. Mussies, "Pagans, Jews and Christians at Ephesus," in *Studies on the Hellenistic Background of the New Testament*, eds., P. W. van der Horst and G. Mussies (Utrecht, University Press, 1990), 177, and E. Yamauchi, *The Archaeology of New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1980), 79.

^{iv} G. E. Bean, *Aegean Turkey*, 2nd Edition (London: John Murray, 1984), 131.

^v Strabo reported Ephesus' daily growth in prosperity and other literary sources testify to the existence of guilds of bakers, wine-dealers, wool-dealers, garment-sellers, cobblers, temple-builders and carpenters, sawyers, bed-sawyers, knob-turners, silversmiths, surveyors, workers in private baths, fishermen and fish-dealers, money-changers and various other associations. The existence of those who prepared purple and of tanners, leather-workers, shoe-makers, of a highly regarded school of sculptors and a famous medical school re-enforce this picture, as does the fact that Ephesus was a centre for both intellectual studies and the "entertainment business". Local resources were plentiful with marble, salt pans and fisheries among the natural resources freely available locally. It was a major banking centre known as "the common treasury of Asia and her recourse in need." Magie, 583. For the above, see further Bean, 131; T. R. S. Broughton, "Roman Asia Minor," in *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, vol. 4, ed. T. Frank (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1938), 623, 627, 645, 804, 833f, 842, 851-5, 889f; O. F. A. Meinardus, *St. Paul in Ephesus* (New York: Carataz, 1979), 53. Yamauchi, 82, notes the commendation of Ephesus as an intellectual centre by Apollonius of Tyana and the fact that it was the city of intellectuals and the painters Herodorus, Hipponax, Parrhasius and Apelles and, for a time, the home of

Heraclitus. Note the further discussion on Ephesus' importance as a banking centre in the following discussion of the worship of Diana/Artemis.

^{vi} Under Roman rule, Ephesus became the capital of the province of Asia, the usual residence of the governor and the gateway to Asia through which both commercial and political activity was channelled. See Bean, 131; Trebilco, 292-7, 302-7, and E. M. Blaiklock, *Cities of the New Testament* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1965), 64.

^{vii} Religious life spilled over into other areas; thus the Temple was also a place of asylum. See, R. Oster, "The Ephesian Artemis as an Opponent of Early Christianity," in *Jahrbuch fur Antike und Christentum* 19 (1976): 34f, and C. J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches in their Local Setting* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1986), 48-50.

^{viii} Blaiklock, 63, and, especially, E. A. Litton, "Ephesus", in IBD, 235-240, esp., 237.

^{ix} Akurgal, 153. See also Trebilco, 323, where he quotes the contemporary witness of Antipater to the grandeur of the Temple.

^x W. J. Conybere and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (London: Longmans, 1905), 423. Evidence for this is seen in the inscription of Vibius Salutaris found in the Great Theatre that describes a lavish procession and sacrifice to the goddess. See J. T. Wood, *Discoveries in Ephesus* (London: Longmans, 1877), Appendix, "Inscriptions from the Great Theatre," 9-27, and Meinardus, 96. T. C. Mitchell, *The Bible in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1988), 113, notes that "Religious activity in the cities of the empire was, with rare exceptions, explicit and public, often involving the whole community in unified celebration of the gods. Its significance lay in the rituals that all could observe and in which many citizens participated. These ranged from prayer, sacrifice, solemn ceremony, and religious processions to feast, games and festivals."

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^{xii} Trebilco, 321.

^{xiii} Oster, "Ephesian Artemis," 38-44; Trebilco, 331-335. W. M. Ramsay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: John Murray, 1896), 229, says, "The Ephesian Artemis was recognised, even in the first century after Christ, as in some sense a deity for the whole province of Asia."

^{xiv} Blaiklock, 64; Mussies, 178; Meinardus, 51. Trebilco, 326, notes, "It is clear that Artemis of Ephesus exercised a great deal of influence on the economic activity of both Ephesus and Asia Minor of our [first century AD] period, and greatly contributed to the financial welfare of the region." Oster, "Ephesian Artemis," notes this is evidenced by the fact that the Temple was the beneficiary of vast legacies and donations and was, thus, able to dominate the banking system (and, therefore, Asian life and culture). While Diana dominated the religious life of Ephesus and beyond, the city's religious life was wide and varied. Evidence exists for the worship of Isis, Demeter, Kore, Athena, the Pythian Apollo and Zeus as well as several Egyptian deities, including Serapis. So Oster, "Ephesian Artemis," 25f; Bean, 142-14; Akurgal, 163f. The cult of Dionysius played an important part in the religious life of Ephesus (Oster, "Ephesian Artemis," 26; Bean, 145), Emperor-worship was practised (Yamauchi, 86f; Bean, 132) and certain individuals were also worshipped (Oster, "Ephesian Artemis," 26f.). Moreover, Josephus (Meinardus, 61) reports a large and privileged Jewish colony in Ephesus who, possibly (Hemer, 37f.), had possessed citizenship from Seleucid times. While archaeological evidence for their presence is scanty and no synagogue has yet been found, a menorah is carved into the steps of the Celsus library (G. L. Borchert, "Ephesus," in ISBE, vol. 2, 116). Further, Ephesus was a major centre of the occult, the ancient writers regularly referring to the Ephesian amulets which brought invincibility and the inscriptions mentioning magicians and curses. For a full discussion of this, see C. E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic. The Concept of Power in Ephesians in the Light of Its Historical Setting* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989) and, more generally, idem, *Powers of Darkness* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 19-86. Trebilco, 316, notes certain occult charms were associated with the goddess and Meinardus, 93f., says, "The importance of cults in Ephesus was so great in the latter part of the 1st century that the emperor Vespasian maintained a celebrated astrologer named Balbillus in Ephesus although he had banished all magicians and astrologers from Rome."

^{xv} S. Erdemgil, *Ephesus* (Istanbul: Net Turistik Yayinlar A.S., 1998), 82. M. Baran, *Ephesus* (Izmir: Molay Matbaakcilik, n/d), 52, tentatively supports the same idea.

^{xvi} It is rejected by O. F. A. Meinardus, *St Paul in Ephesus* (New York: Carataz, 1979), 54-56; idem, "The Christian Remains of the Seven Churches of the Apocalypse," *Biblical Archaeologist*, 37/3 (1974): 244-9, and E. Yamauchi, *The Archaeology of New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1980), 102. The latter acknowledges, none the less, the likelihood of the existence of bordellos in Ephesus; the existence of at least 45 in first-century Rome is already known.

^{xvii} See the Appendix.

^{xviii} Trebilco, 324; Yamauchi, *Archaeology*, 104-106, and G. Mussies, "Pagans, Jews and Christians at Ephesus," in *Studies on the Hellenistic Background of the New Testament*, eds., P. W. van der Horst & G. Mussies (Utrecht: University Press, 1990), 183f.

^{xix} Mussies, 181.

^{xx} G. E. Bean, *Aegean Turkey*, 2nd Edition (London: John Murray, 1984), 134.

^{xxi} Bean, 135; Meinardus, *Paul*, 98; E. M. Blaiklock, *Cities of the New Testament* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1965), 63; G. L. Borchert, "Ephesus," in *ISBE*, Vol. X, 117; W. Ramsay, "Diana of the Ephesians," in *HDB*, Vol. 2, 605; Mussies, 183; Yamauchi, *Archaeology*, 106f, and Erdemgil, *Ephesus*, 150.

^{xxii} Bean, 135.

^{xxiii} Ramsay, "Diana," 605.

^{xxiv} R. Oster, "The Ephesian Artemis as an Opponent of Early Christianity," *Jahrbuch fur Antike und Christentum*, 19 (1976): 28, and Trebilco, 319f.

^{xxv} S. Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1995), 31; S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (London: Pimlico, 1994), 6; E. Fantham, H. P. Foley, N. B. Kampen, S. B. Pomeroy & H. A. Shapiro, *Women in the Classical World* (Oxford: University Press, 1994), 134, and M. Meyer, "Mysteries," in Evans, *Background*, 720-725, variously note that the ancient world was able to combine conceptions which we might view as paradoxical.