

THE SEVEN CITIES OF ASIA MINOR

I. EPHESUS

The word Ephesus means "desirable." It is also said to carry the meaning of "~~having relaxed~~" or "~~let-go~~." It was considered the most desirable city of the province and of Asia Minor.

It was located at the mouth of the Cayster River on the slopes of the hills overlooking the Aegean Sea. Its beautiful location, together with the fertile soil and excellent climate, made it a very desirable place to live. During its earlier history Ephesus had one of the finest harbors of the world, which was protected by high hills and a narrow channel easily guarded from enemy ships. The ships of all nations visited this harbor, and Ephesus became one of the chief commercial centers of the west coast of Asia. By imperial edict it was made the gateway to the province of Asia for Roman officials.

Stamped on coins found in the ruins of Ephesus are the titles, "First of all the greatest," and "The first and greatest metropolis of Asia."

The city was known as "~~the Light of Asia~~" and "~~the first City of Asia~~." Ephesus was the meeting place of several important Roman highways. One of these was the great trade route from the valley of the Euphrates which ran through Colosse and Laodicea. Another came from the province of Galatia through Sardis. And the third was the great coastal highway running northward through Smyrna and Pergamos and southward through the Maeander valley. Since the emperor of Rome visited the provinces through his representative, the proconsul, "Ephesus was the spot where the Majesty of Rome first set foot on the soil of the Province." (McKnight.)

Archaeological Discoveries

From the harbor to the city was a very wide and beautiful boulevard entering the city under a triumphal arch, and lined with monumental buildings. The city was adorned with magnificent temples built by Nero, Hadrian, and Severus, besides the ~~famous temple of Diana~~ (Latin), or Artemis (Greek). The city was consecrated in the minds of the people by many myths and legends of gods and goddesses, making it one of the sacred cities of the pagan world. The Temple of Diana alone made the city famous. This temple was ~~one of the seven wonders of the ancient world~~. The earliest temple was a century in building, and was completed in 480 B. C.

Through an inscription found in the ruins of the city it was learned that the temple (of Diana) was not located in the city itself, where all others had been searching for it. The searchers discovered a magnificent gate, through which ran a street thirty-five feet wide paved with stones of fine marble. The temple was built of white, red, blue, and yellow marble of the finest quality. At least part of this material had doubtless been brought to Ephesus from Patmos, where large marble quarries were located. Instead of mortar, ~~gold was reputed to have been used between the joints of marble blocks.~~

Hundreds and perhaps thousands of priests were connected with the temple ritual. There were also multitudes of priestesses dedicated to prostitution in the service of the temple.

Diana was reckoned as the ~~daughter of Jupiter~~ and the twin sister of ~~Apollo~~. She was known as the ~~moon goddess~~, and was doubtless one of the many manifestations of Semiramis, the "Mother of the gods." Inscriptions call her the "Savior goddess" and the "Mother of God." She is represented as a ~~many-breasted goddess seated with an infant in her arms~~. In A.D. 431 a great council of the Christian church was held at Ephesus, at which time the phrase "Mother of God" was applied to Mary.

Traffic in shrines was one of the principal industries of Ephesus. The ~~sale of these idols~~, or shrines, to pilgrim worshipers from all parts of the world resulted in an enormous profit. Not only were they worshiped as gods but they were supposed to charm away evil spirits and protect the devotee from danger of all kinds. An inscription has been found with the name of "~~Demetrius son of Menophilus~~," which indicates that he was president of the board of magistrates, or city fathers. This probably accounts for his great influence and authority and explains his ability to ~~stir up the whole city against Paul.~~

Hundreds of shrines have been discovered, with inscriptions indicating that the shrine business constituted one of the chief industries. Records of gifts of gold and silver shrines valued as high as \$850,000 were found on inscriptions. One inscription was found written on black marble, giving rules of magic. This throws light on the statement in Acts 19:18-19. These books of "curious arts," magic, charms, and incantations were sold to visitors at fabulous prices, and constituted another lucrative source of income that helped make Ephesus wealthy and famous.

City of Change

The message to the church of Ephesus and the subsequent history of the city indicate that the "desirable city" would become the city of change and decay, the declining city. After the ~~destruction of the temple~~ in the third century and the ~~filling up of the harbor~~ with sediment from the Cayster River, Ephesus rapidly declined. Efforts to hold the water back and deepen the harbor were made by making narrower the channel between the harbor and the sea, but this only seemed to hasten the infilling process. All

dredging operations proved unavailing. Today the site of the once proud and prosperous Ephesus is six miles from the sea, and what was once the entrance to the spacious harbor, is a shallow, sandy beach unapproachable by ships. The harbor was abandoned in the fourth century, and its wide expanse is now a pestilential morass covered with mud and rushes, or windswept plains overgrown with weeds. The city soon suffered the cruel fate of the temple and harbor, and is now a part of the desert waste. The city has literally been moved "out of his place," as Christ threatened to do with the candlestick of the church of Ephesus.

The candlestick was removed, and "the first city of Asia" was no longer a brilliant light in the commercial and political world. "The Light of Asia" went out in total darkness. Silence, malaria, and death now brood over the ruins of the once-magnificent city. The heavy masonry of her ruined temples and walls lies scattered in profusion where the metropolis of Asia once reveled in her pride and glory.

II. SMYRNA

Smyrna was the next city and church of importance in the province of Asia, and was the nearest to Ephesus, being about forty miles to the north.

Smyrna is synonymous with myrrh, which was an aromatic substance used sometimes as a healing ointment but more especially for embalming the dead. According to Psalms 45:8 and Canticles 3:6, myrrh seems to have been the special perfume of Christ as King and Bridegroom. One of the chief ingredients of myrrh was made by crushing and bleeding a plant of the same name. This thorny plant, or tree, grows about eight or nine feet high, and is found in Arabia and to some extent in Palestine. It is very bitter to the taste but has a fragrant odor, and the more the plant is crushed and bruised the greater the fragrance. The name Smyrna, therefore, indicates suffering and persecution which prove a blessing. Smyrna, therefore, indicates suffering and persecution which prove a blessing. Smyrna would be crushed by cruel persecutions, but as a result of her sufferings would be anointed for a death and burial that would end in a resurrection and renewal of life.

Mount Pagus is a conical-shaped mound more than five hundred feet high, and was located in the center of the ancient city. Its summit was crowned with a shrine dedicated to Nemesis, a Greek goddess who was supposed to be a form of Artemis. Because of its splendor and its garland of magnificent buildings, this hilltop was also known as The Crown of Smyrna. Circling the base of the mount "like a necklace on a statue" was one of the finest streets of the ancient world, called The Street of Gold. When Apollonius visited the city he advised the proud citizens to prefer a crown of splendid men rather than a crown of beautiful buildings. The city itself was sometimes called The Crown of Ionia. This historical background gives significance to the

promise of Jesus, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." The promise had a forceful and peculiar meaning to the suffering members of the church of Smyrna.

All through her long and eventful history the city of Smyrna has suffered from besieging armies, massacres, earthquakes, fires, and plagues. About 600 B. C. the Lydians captured and almost completely destroyed the city. It lay in partial ruins for four hundred years. It was crushed almost to death but was rebuilt by the Greeks and again became a flourishing city. It was restored to life and prosperity. The city was destroyed by a terrible earthquake in A. D. 178, only eighty years after the church received the Apocalypse. It was again crushed to death but was destined to recover, for it was "the city of life." The city was restored to more than its former beauty and glory by Emperor Marcus Aurelius. There has seldom been a period of two years without an earthquake. The city was almost completely destroyed by a severe quake in 1688, when the earth opened and swallowed up five thousand people. In 1758 a plague almost depopulated the city, and in 1922 the Turks captured and partially destroyed the modern Smyrna.

Smyrna is the only one of the seven cities of Asia which retains anything of its ancient standing. It is today the largest city of Asia Minor, and is the commercial center of the Levant. The present name under Turkish rule is Izmir.

Smyrna was the home of Polycarp and the scene of his martyrdom in A. D. 168.

III. PERGAMOS

Pergamos, or Pergamum, was located about forty miles northeast of Smyrna in the Caicus valley and on the imperial highway running along the coast of Asia. Pergamos was fifteen miles from the Aegean Sea.

The city was named for the lofty hill on which the ancient city was built. The name therefore means tower, height, or elevation, and carries with it the idea of exaltation. It was the exalted city. The name also indicates a union as through marriage. The lofty hill on which the ancient city was built and from which it took its name was an immense rock rising one thousand feet abruptly out of the broad and fertile valley. The walls of the elevation were almost perpendicular, except on one side, where there was a steep and narrow passageway to the top, which was easily fortified and guarded. Because of its natural defenses the city of Pergamos was considered an impregnable stronghold. The only way it was ever captured was by stratagem. In Pergamos, Lysimachus deposited his treasure, valued at \$10,000,000, because he considered it the safest place in his kingdom.

A Famous City

Pliny called Pergamos the most illustrious city of Asia. It was the educational center of Western Asia. There Homer, one of the earliest poets, and Herodotus, "the father of history" studied and wrote, because of the great library, which according to Plutarch contained 200,000 volumes. It was second only to the world-famous library of Alexandria. These libraries caused a long and bitter rivalry between the two cities. Egypt, in order to curb the growth of the Pergamum library, withheld shipments of papyrus, the ancestor of paper. To meet the emergency the Pergamenians dressed the skins of animals, on which to do their writing, calling the new writing material Pergamus, and later, parchment:

"A royal city," exclaimed Sir William Ramsay as he viewed the ruins of the ancient city of Pergamos. He said: "Beyond all other sites in Asia Minor it gives the traveller the impression of a royal city, the home of authority: the rocky hill on which it stands is so huge, and dominates the broad plain of the Caicus so proudly and boldly." It was indeed "a royal city" and a royal residence.

For 250 years Pergamos was the official capital of the province. It was also the seat of the Commune of Asia. From Pergamos the decrees of the Caesars were executed throughout the province. This gives force and meaning to Christ's introduction to the church of Pergamos: "These are the words of Him who wields the sharp sword with the double edge." (Moffatt.) The broad double-bladed Roman sword was known as "the cut and thrust sword." It was the emblem of the highest official authority, carrying with it the power of life and death, and this power was vested in the proconsuls of the province, who lived at Pergamos. The governor wielded the sword of Rome from this impregnable fortress.

According to Pliny, Pergamos was also the seat of a Roman supreme court. To this city prisoners were brought for trial from all parts of the province, and were sentenced by the power that ministered life and death to all. Therefore the sword that proceeded out of the mouth of Christ is a symbol of His judicial authority. He too wields the power of life and death to all who hear His message. The One who has all power and authority speaks to the church located in the city where official authority and power dwells.

Throne of Satan

Jesus said to His people in Pergamos, "I know where you dwell. Satan's throne is there" (Weymouth), or "Where Satan sits enthroned" (Moffatt). "Throne" is a better rendering than "seat," for the same original is translated "throne" in Revelation 1:4 and 3:21. The capital of the province was also the headquarters of the pagan religion of the province, for in all ancient nations church and state were united. The ruler of the state was also the head of the religion of the state.

Pergamos was a city of heathen temples and a pantheon of pagan deities. Jupiter was said to have had his origin there, and to him and other Greek and Roman gods were erected many beautiful and costly temples, giving it the name of "the city of temples." It was the metropolis of heathen deities. Temples were built and dedicated to Jupiter, Zeus, Athena, Dionysius, and Aesculapius, the Greek god of medicine, and also called "the god of Pergamum." It was also the center of emperor worship. In A. D. 29 a great temple was erected to the worship of Augustus Caesar, who was to be prayed to as "Lord Caesar." Domitian decreed that all peoples should address him as "Our Lord and our God." Pergamos contained a sacred grove called "the glory of the city." The city was known as the "temple-keeper" and "temple-warden" of the gods of paganism. It was the seat of the imperial church and the symbol of "rampant paganism."

The Temple of Zeus was the most celebrated of all the temples of Pergamos, and was dedicated to Aesculapius, "the serpent god" or "god of healing." It was also known as the Temple of Aesculapius, who was called "the Great Physician" and "the Saviour." He was also given other titles showing that he was a counterfeit of Christ. In this temple a living serpent was kept and worshipped. Serpent worship was so universal in Pergamos that many coins have been found with a picture of a serpent entwined around a pole. In the Temple of Zeus many miracles of healing were supposed to have been performed. In connection with this temple was also a famous school of medicine.

The Temple of Zeus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the ruins of which are still visible.

When Cyrus captured the city of Babylon, the ancient seat of Satan's counterfeit system of religion, the supreme pontiff of the Chaldean mysteries and his retinue of priests fled from the city and ultimately made their residence in Pergamos. Here they re-established their Babylonian worship and made the kings of Pergamum the chief pontiffs of their religion. When Attalus III, the last of their priest-kings, died in 133 B. C., he bequeathed both his royal and priestly offices to the Romans. A century later Caesar became both emperor of Rome and Pontifex Maximus of the religion of the empire. He was given divine honors, which he handed down to his successors. These were later assumed by the popes, the supreme pontiffs of ecclesiastical Rome. Thus Pergamos became the connecting link between the two Babylons, the ancient and the modern.

IV. THYATIRA

Thyatira was located about twenty-five miles southeast of Pergamos, and according to Strabo was a little to the left of the main road. It was a garrison city built on the plains, with no natural fortifications, and was

captured, destroyed, and rebuilt many times. The name is said to signify "sweet savor of labor," or "sacrifice of contrition." Sir William Ramsay says that the name indicates "weakness made strong," and other writers give the meaning as "never weary of sacrifice."

Thyatira at the time of this epistle was an important manufacturing city, its citizens being mostly poor and humble laborers, just the opposite of those in Pergamos. They were made contrite by sacrifices, and their lives were made fragrant by the blessings of labor. The workmen of Thyatira were organized into labor unions, or "guilds." The two leading industries were the manufacture of instruments of brass, bronze, and other metals, and the manufacture and dyeing of cloth, especially of the royal purple. Homer speaks of the dyeing of red and purple cloth as being characteristic of the city. It is significant that purple and scarlet are the chief colors worn by the popes and cardinals of the ruling church of the Middle Ages.

Christ introduced Himself to the church in Thyatira as the "Son of God, who hath His eyes like unto a flame of fire, and His feet are like fine brass." "Eyes like flaming fire" and "whose eyes flash like fire and whose feet glow like bronze," are other translations. This language was very familiar to a people who labored in foundries with their flaming furnaces, where fine brass, bronze, and other metals were manufactured into all sorts of articles for the market.

V. SARDIS

Sardis was founded in the twelfth century before Christ, and was one of the oldest and most important cities of Asia. It was located about thirty-five miles southeast of Thyatira. Until captured by Cyrus in 549 B. C., Sardis was the capital of the kingdom of Lydia, and became so again after the fall of the Roman power in Asia in A. D. 395. Lydia was one of the richest kingdoms of the ancient world. The Lydians are reputed to have been the inventors of coined money. Speaking of their wealth, the historian Ridpath says: "A great cause of the prosperity and wealth of the Lydian kingdom was the natural fertility of the country. No other of all Asia Minor had so rich a soil."

The ancient city of Sardis was built on a plateau of crumbling rock rising 1,500 feet above the plain. The plateau was a part of Mount Tomolus, whose height was 6,700 feet. The walls of the elevation on which the city was built were almost perpendicular, and the city was inaccessible except by one narrow passage which was steep and easily fortified and guarded. Sardis was considered an impregnable fortress.

Citizens Overconfident

The natural defenses of Sardis made the guards and citizens proud and overconfident. The walls were carelessly guarded, with sometimes fatal

results. Because of the failure of the guards to watch, Cyrus captured the city by stratagem in 549 B. C. Solon had warned Croesus not to be too confident of safety from attack, but even after the army of Cyrus appeared on the plain below, he saw no reason for concern. But the unexpected happened. One dark night a Persian soldier resolved "to approach the citadel" and attempt to climb the precipice "at a place where no guards were ever set." There the rock was so "precipitous and impracticable" that it would seem impossible to scale it. Herodotus says that the soldier "climbed the rock himself and other Persians followed in his track, until a large number had mounted to the top. Thus Sardis was taken, and given up entirely to pillage." But the lesson was soon forgotten, for 330 years later the city was again captured through stratagem by Antiochus the Great.

Appropriate Message

Sardis means "those escaping" or "that which remains." The name, the message, and the subsequent history of the city and church, indicate a good start but a bad finish, a change for the worse. Sir William Ramsay calls Sardis "the city of death." Its history is just the opposite of that of Smyrna, which "was dead and is alive;" or is "the city of life." Sardis had "a name that thou livest, and art dead." Like Ephesus, the city and church of Sardis began with a glorious history and ended in a heap of ruins.

Sardis is now heaps of ruins, with no signs of life. It is indeed "the city of death."

Sardis never fully recovered from the earthquake of A. D. 17, and was only partially rebuilt. When this epistle was written, the city was rapidly waning in prestige and glory, but its inhabitants were still boastful of the reputation and history of the past. Decay and death were inevitable, but the Sardians refused to recognize the fate of the city and continued to live on its ancient glory. The city had a name only, whereas in reality it was dead, or rapidly dying.

VI. PHILADELPHIA

* Philadelphia was located about twenty-eight miles southeast of Sardis. The city was founded in 189 B. C. by Attalus Philadelphus, for whom it was named. Some believe that it was so named also because of the love and loyalty existing between Philadelphus and his brother, the king of Lydia. The city was also known as Decapolis, because it was one of the ten cities of the plain. It was also known as Decapolis, because it was one of the ten cities of the plain. It was sometimes called Little Athens because of the magnificence of its public buildings. Its modern Turkish name is Ala Shehr, which means "The City of God" or "The Exalted City." Philadelphia has thus been given a number of new names.

Philadelphia guarded and commanded an important pass through the mountains between the Hermus and Meander valleys. It was thus the keeper of the key to the door, or gateway, to the eastern highlands, with the power to open and close according to the will of the officials. Through this portal passed the mail and trade and commerce of the west to the wide regions of central and eastern Lydia.

A Place of Trial

Philadelphia was subject to frequent and severe earthquakes. Trench declared that "no city of Asia Minor suffered more, or so much, from violent and oft-recurring earthquakes," and the historian Strabo, who lived between 64 B. C. and A. D. 21, said that Philadelphia was "full of earthquakes." He may have been there at the time of the great earthquake that destroyed the city in A. D. 17. That was only one of a series of quakes that kept the citizens in a state of fearful expectancy. Strabo wrote: "Philadelphia has no trustworthy walls, but daily in one direction or another they keep tottering and falling apart. The inhabitants, however, pursue their original purpose, ever keeping in mind the writhing pangs of the ground, and building with a view to counteracting them."

Strabo was astonished that a city should ever have been founded in such a locality, and he questioned the sanity of the people for re-entering the ruined city and planning to rebuild to withstand the future shocks which were momentarily expected. He felt that when people are driven from a city by earthquakes they ought to be wise enough never to return. He declared that the walls of the houses were incessantly opening, and sometimes one, and sometimes another part of the city was experiencing some damage. The citizens therefore lived in constant dread of quaking earth and falling buildings.

Because of this situation the people often fled to the open country and lived in tents or booths in earthquake seasons in order to keep themselves beyond the range of disaster. Although the city was often shattered and the migrations from its ruins were frequent, so that its citizens lived in constant terror, yet in spite of an ever present sense of danger the brave Philadelphians were determined to make the city realize the aims for which it was founded. This constant fear of the day of trial, when the citizens must flee for their lives, made the language employed by Christ very striking. (Verses 10-12.) He encouraged His people with the promise that if faithful they would one day enter the New Jerusalem, the city of God, where they could dwell safely and "go no more out."

Philadelphia was a city of many new names. When the city was destroyed by the great earthquake of A. D. 17, Tiberius gave \$600,000 to help rebuild. In appreciation the citizens changed the name of the city to Neo-Caesarea in honor of the donor, but when the emperor became a cruel tyrant, the Philadelphians became ashamed of the new name. During the reign of Vespasian the name was again changed, to Flavia, in his honor, as he was the first of the Flavian family to rule. These changes of name doubtless called for great celebration of dedication, when the whole city worshiped the emperor in whose honor the new name was given.

VII. LAODICEA

* The city was located about forty miles southeast of Philadelphia and one hundred miles east of Ephesus. It was founded by Antiochus II between 260 and 246 B. C. , and was named in honor of his wife, Laodice, who afterward poisoned him. This is the Antiochus who formed the marriage league with Ptolemy Philadelphus, king of Egypt, in fulfillment of Daniel 11:6.

Laodicea was mostly populated with Syrians and Jews transported from Babylon.

A Wealthy City

* Laodicea was located in the midst of a rich farming country and was famed for its wealth. In it extensive banking operations were carried on. Cicero proposed to cash his treasury bills of exchange in Laodicea because of these facilities. The city had large markets controlled mostly by the Jews, of whom there were 7,500 besides women and children at the time the epistle was written. So wealthy were the citizens that when the city was destroyed by an earthquake in A. D. 60, they refused the help offered by the imperial Roman government and rebuilt at their own expense. This example of self-sufficiency was so rare that it made the city famous. Because of their situation Christ's statement regarding the pride of spiritual wealth on the part of the church members is full of meaning. He spoke to the rich merchants and bankers of this wealthy mercantile city in their own dialect.

The city was also noted for the black cloth manufactured there from wool produced in the valley. The wool was glossy black and of a soft texture almost like silk and became famous throughout the whole region. Black garments were almost universally worn by the Laodiceans, and of them they were very proud. Christ advised the Christians of the city to buy of Him "white raiment," which represented the beautiful robe of His own righteousness. The people of Laodicea were familiar with the white toga worn by Roman citizens and officials. To be privileged to wear this white garment was esteemed a high honor. To the Romans it was symbolic of victory, and to the Christians it represented purity of character through the imputed and imparted righteousness of Christ.

Noted Health Resort

In connection with the Temple of Karu was a renowned school of medicine. This temple was one of two hundred throughout the Greek and Roman world dedicated to Aesculapius, the Greek god of medicine and the pagan counterfeit of the Messiah. He was known as "The Great Physician." In this temple was made the famous Phygian eyesalve, called collyrium, which was sold in all parts of the then-known world. This gives forceful meaning to the counsel of the Great Physician, who advised the spiritually blind Laodiceans to buy eyesalve of Him that they might have spiritual vision.

Also near the city were a number of hot, cold, and lukewarm springs, and especially the latter. Most of these waters contained minerals with supposed healing properties. Thousands of sick people journeyed to Laodicea to be physically benefited by the eyesalve, the mineral water, and the hot and lukewarm baths. Although the water was pleasing to the body for bathing, most of it was nauseous to those who drank. This makes very appropriate the language used by Christ in this epistle.

Proud and Self-Satisfied

In extravagant fashions and fine apparel the city was the Paris of its time.

Laodicea was also famous as a pleasure resort for the physically strong and prosperous, and a health resort for the sick.

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by Taylor G. Bunch