

## The Supremacy of Christ

### Acts 19 & Ephesians

The Apostle Paul arrived in the city of Ephesus around AD 53 on his third missionary journey. As with the first two journeys, his third began in Antioch, as he made his way overland to Ephesus.

**Acts 19** Paul remained in Ephesus for three years, longer than with any other church-plant on his three journeys.

Ephesus was the fifth largest city in the Roman Empire. It served as the provincial capital of the senatorial province of Asia Minor.

It was situated on a harbor, giving the city access to the entire Mediterranean, as well as on the west end of the Royal Road, making it a center for politics, commerce, and entertainment with its massive theater.

Ephesus was the leading city of the richest region in the entire Roman Empire. "Ephesus" means *desirable*. It was aptly called the "mother city" of Asia.

Religiously, Ephesus stood second to no one because of the prominence of the goddess Artemis (a.k.a. as Diana).

Her temple was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Its size, in terms of cubic feet, was four times that of the Parthenon in Athens. It was 425 ft. long and 225 ft. wide. The temple was a major banking center, her image adorned the coinage. A month of the year was named after her. Olympic-style games were held in her honor, and she was trusted and loved as the guardian of the city.

For those who gave her allegiance, Artemis was the benevolent virgin goddess, the divine huntress, and fertility deity. She was believed to have incredible power and would sympathetically use it on behalf of her devotees. Thus, she was acclaimed *queen of the cosmos*, (*kurios*) lord and (*soter*) savior.

**Acts 19:35** It was believed her goddess image came to earth directly from heaven. She was hailed as wielding power and authority over heaven, earth, and even the underworld. Artemis was believed to be able to answer prayer and even raise the dead!

The power of Artemis was believed to be especially evident over the various kinds of spirits that people feared—astral, underworld, and terrestrial spirits, the spirits of wildlife and nature, which were represented by the images of frightening beasts around the lower portion of her tightly-wrapped skirt.

For her devotees, she could even break the chains of astrological fate. Fate was an enormous concern to the Ephesians. They deeply feared what the stars dictated and their associated principalities, powers, and dominions—the spirit beings in the heavenly realms. They believed Artemis had power over the stars and these spirits, represented by the signs of the Zodiac that formed a necklace on her statues. They also believed she could

protect them from various kinds of tormenting spirits, defending them against spirits coming to bring injury, sickness, plague, and death.

One of the more prominent roles Artemis played in ancient paganism was that of champion of virgin women and what feminist groups today refer to as the Sacred Feminine. Artemis was believed to oversee a woman's transition from virginity to marriage and then to giving birth to children. Some ancient sources reveal that, when bulls were sacrificed to Artemis, their testicles were draped over her image to revitalize her powers of fertility, which some believe are represented by the rows of bulbous protrusions on her image.

Actually, these objects have mystified scholars for centuries. They appear to represent female breasts, but this is likely not the case. More recent research actually supports language Paul uses in **Ephesians** related to the magical powers of Artemis.

These bulbous protrusions may represent little bags filled with magical objects used as fetishes. They functioned as symbols of fertility, spiritual power, and protection. On the objects in these little bags people packed around were magical words known as *The Ephesia Grammata* (*The Ephesian Letters*). These magical words were the names of spirit beings (*principalities and powers*) inscribed on the image of Artemis and amulets used in spells and incantations. These names date back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century before Christ.

Spoken in proper order, the devotee of Artemis was assured of having access to supernatural power. The words in their proper order were *askion, kataskion, liks, tetraks, damnameneus, aisia*.

The dominant mindset of the practice of magic in places like Ephesus was that the spirit world exercised influence over virtually every aspect of life. The goal of the magician was to discern the helpful spirits from the harmful ones and learn the distinct operations of their relative strengths and authority.

The magicians and sorcerers of Ephesus instructed those possessed by spirits to repeat to themselves, in proper order, the six magical names associated with Artemis, names of spiritual forces in the heavenly realms, as a way to drive out other powers and dominions, to overcome the astrological fates in the stars, to win a chariot race or an athletic event at the Games, to win the heart of a woman, or even to bring a curse on an enemy.

The irony is, they appealed to nothing more than demonic powers to overcome other demonic powers. The very thing they feared—being enslaved by the powers of darkness and the fates—were the very powers they were looking to for help.

In our own time and place, there are layers of culture that parallel ancient Ephesus. Neo-paganism is flourishing in Oregon, including Eugene.

Track back through the origins of these modern movements and you will find their roots in the same

paganism of the Canaanites, as well as the first century world of Paul.

**Acts 19:27** - The Ephesians celebrated Artemis as a goddess of supreme power worshipped *“by the entire world”*.

Bringing the Gospel to Ephesus was of great strategic importance. **Acts 19:10** Paul planted a church in Ephesus through which Jesus was preached throughout all Asia Minor.

**Acts 19:26** Paul had the audacity to preach *“Man-made gods are no gods at all.”*

**Acts 19:8** Paul came preaching the kingdom of God (i.e., the sovereign rule of Christ).

Christ, not Artemis, was the One who came from heaven to earth in physical form as *Kurios* and *Soter*, (Lord and Savior), of the cosmos. Christ, not Artemis, is the One with absolute authority over the spirit realm, including the celestial, terrestrial and underworlds. Only he answers prayer and sets people free from the forces of darkness, including the fates.

**Acts 19:11** To authenticate Paul's message about Jesus, *“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to sick and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.”*

No incantations, no rituals, no naming of the names—God simply demonstrated through his servant Paul that, when it comes to real power and authority to save, Jesus is it!

God made clear his infinitely great power and glory by doing what Artemis could never do—save and secure people forever from the power of darkness.

**Acts 19:13-20** The seven sons of Sceva tried using the name of Jesus like the six magical names of the Artemis cult.

The Christian community is stunned by what happened to the Sceva's sons. Luke uses the perfect tense in **v. 18**—*“many of those who believed”* indicating these people were already Christians. This parallels what we saw in **Joshua 24**.

These believers brought out their magical scrolls with all their magical spells and formulas for dealing with life, and they burned them. The value of these magical scrolls totaled 50,000 drachmas, or 50,000 days wages! The

median household income in Eugene is just shy of \$200 a day = \$10 million!

Understanding this historical background is crucial to grasping how **Ephesians** speaks to our day, especially when it comes to Paul prayers in the book of **Ephesians**.

Several of the particularly rare terms Paul used in his prayers appear in the magical papyri and inscriptions from Ephesus!

He used the same power-vocabulary the Ephesians grew up using as a way to communicate to them the realities of Christ and to show them that what they had been longing for all their lives in their worship of Artemis and the manipulation of the principalities and powers through their magic, was really found in Jesus.

Jesus Christ is far above every principality, power, might and dominion and every name that is named, not only in the present age but also in the age to come. (**Ephesians 1:21**). They didn't need six names. They only needed one—Jesus.

## APPLICATION

1. Our struggle is not against people but with the devil and his minions; we must build bridges to the lost, not build walls of strife and division over political, socio-economical, racial, medical or even moral issues.
2. Don't underestimate the impact neo-paganism is having on society today.
3. As long-standing believers in Jesus Christ, we still have cultural idols we need to confess and forsake to be fully devoted to him.
4. To triumph over the lure of this kind of cultural idolatry, we need the Spirit of God to give us a greater depth of personal insight into God's power and love for us in Christ, insight that inspires us to be imitators of God in the way we live, love and lead every day.