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Idol-Makers Start a Riot in Ephesus

19: 23-41

54-56 AD

Idol-makers start a riot in Ephesus DIG: Why would Demetrius rally people against Paul (see 17:29)? Since this temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, what businesses would be affected by Paul's teachings? What do you think the crowd was seeing and hearing? Why are they there? Why are the Jews trying to get a speaker to represent them? Why would Paul be shouted down? How is concern of the town clerk unlike that of Demetrius?

REFLECT: Success, money and independence are some cultural "idols" (values most people accept without question). What others come to mind? How has your faith affected your relationship to these idols? Could Demetrius have become a believer and kept his business? Can you think of situations today where someone in a "respectable" trade would be forced to choose between that trade and Christ? How have you seen religious and patriotic loyalties used as a cover for economic concerns? What does it mean to follow Yeshua in those times? What originally started as Artemis-worship became Artemis-business. How might believers fall into the same trap?

One lesson that history teaches is the paradoxical truth that the Church thrives under persecution. Effectiveness and persecution usually go hand in hand, since an effective church is a bold church, and a bold church is often a church made strong through suffering. **The Lord Jesus Christ** called **His** Church to be **salt** and **light** in the world (**Matthew 5:13-14**); **salt** stings when rubbed in wounds, and **light** reveals the evil deeds done in darkness. Both can provoke a hostile reaction.

The early Church faced persecution from its inception. In **Yerushalayim**, that persecution came from pharisaic **Judaism (4:1-31, 5:17-42, 6:9-15, 8:1-4)**. In **Pisidian Antioch**, it stemmed from prejudice and envy (**13:44-52**). In **Lystra**, it was the result of ignorant paganism (**14:8-19**). In **Philippi**, it was the reaction to a victory over the demonic realm (**16:16-40**). In **Thessalonica**, it came from an unruly **mob**, urged on by jealous religious

leaders (17:1-9). In **Athens**, the gospel faced the opposition of worldly philosophy (17:16-34). In **Corinth**, as in **Jerusalem**, it came from **Judaism**, but in a Roman court (18:5-17). Whenever the Church boldly and faithfully proclaims the gospel it faces Satanic opposition. It comes as no surprise, then, that persecution also arose in **Ephesus**, stemming from a pseudo-religious materialism.⁴⁶⁶

First, the cause of the riot: Luke informs us that **around that time** - before **Paul** left **Ephesus** as he had planned (19:21-22) - **there arose no small uproar concerning the Way (9:2, 19:9, 22:4, 24:14-22)**. This is probably the context that **Paul** refers to figuratively in **First Corinthians 15:32** when he said: **For I fought wild beasts in Ephesus**. She was not only the capital of the Izmir province, but also the capital of occultism, witchcraft and idolatry. **The city's** greatest claim to fame was **the temple of Artemis**, the goddess of love, fertility, and nourishment. This **temple** was larger than a football field. It was an impressive building, some 165 feet by 345 feet in dimension and built on a platform 240 by 420 feet. Its roof supported by 127 sixty-foot-high stone columns. The entire edifice was elaborately adorned in brilliant colors and gold leaf. The altar was 20 feet square and contained a massive image of **the goddess** with a veiled head, with animals and birds decorating **her** head.⁴⁶⁷

While the **Diana** of the Romans corresponded to **the Artemis** of the Greeks, the **Artemis of the Ephesians** was a totally distinct deity. The original **Ephesian** image was said to have **fallen from heaven (19:35)**. **The temple** statue of **Artemis** also wore a zodiac necklace indicating her power over the control of the stars (see the commentary on **Genesis, to see link click Lw - The Witness of the Stars**). **She** was a multi-breasted goddess who was supposed to be the goddess of fertility in mankind, animals and nature. **She** was known as the Great Mother. Every year in May there was a great festival in **her** honor.

Artemis worship was not confined to **Ephesus**. Scores of priests and prostitute-priestesses served worshipers and tourists from all over the world. There was a sanctuary in Rome also and a similar festival there every April. All told there were at least thirty-three shrines to the mother goddess throughout the Roman Empire. **Ephesus**, however, was considered to be the center of the cult, and pilgrims flocked from all over the empire to worship at its famous **temple**, which was the center of everything in **Ephesus**, including religion and the arts.⁴⁶⁸ **The temple of Artemis** was also a major treasury and bank of the ancient world, where merchants, kings, and even cities made deposits, and where their money could be supposedly kept safe under the protection of their **deity**.⁴⁶⁹

The "lusty month of May" brought the annual month-long Festival of **Artemis**, honoring the

goddess. The highlight of the festival was a solemn processional in which the image of **the goddess** was carried through the streets between **the theater** and **the temple**. Nearly the whole province converged on **Ephesus** to “worship,” and indulge in sin of every imaginable kind . . . and spend money. Souvenir salesmen and merchants depended on the festival for their yearly prophets. Tens-of-thousands bought trinkets and such to remember the occasion. Especially popular were wooden, **silver**, or gold images of **the goddess** and **the temple**.⁴⁷⁰

The instigator of the riot was **a man named Demetrius , a silversmith, a maker of silver shrines of Artemis - was providing no small amount of business to the craftsmen (19:23-24)**. **These silver shrines** were miniature representations of the most sacred portion of the pagan **temple**; that part of it where the statue of the goddess stood. **They** were set up in homes and worn as good luck charms.

Concealing **his** real motive, which was greed, **Demetrius** concealed this with the appearance of civic pride. Being the leader of **the silversmith** guild, **he gathered these together, along with those of related occupations, and he said, “Men, you know that our wealth is from this business,** thus revealing that it wasn’t a religious issue, but an economic issue. **They** had become **wealthy** because of idolatry. **You see and hear that not only in Ephesus but also throughout all Asia (19:10), Paul has persuaded and perverted a considerable crowd, saying that handmade gods are not gods at all (17:29)**. **Not only is there a danger that this trade of ours might come into disrepute, but to also** seem that it was a religious issue, **he said that the temple of the great goddess Artemis might be considered as nothing. She whom all Asia and the world worships might even be thrown down from her majesty (19:25-27)**. All this was going to be set aside by only one **man . . . and a Jew** at that.⁴⁷¹

Second, the characteristics of the riot: **Demetrius’** scheme worked. The specter of financial disaster, the challenge to **their** fervently held religious beliefs, and the threat to **their** civic pride were too much for **the mob** to bear.

The first characteristic of the riot was anger: **When they heard his lies, they were filled with anger and began shouting and kept yelling, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians for hours (19:28)!” Demetrius** had accomplished his goal and whipped the crowd into a frenzy. Inflamed by his incendiary speech, **the people** surged into the streets, invoking the name of **their goddess**. Like **Jeremiah’s far eschatological prophecy** of the end times, **people will go mad** as a result of **their** own hand made **idols** (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Ec - Babylon’s Enemy and](#)

Isra'el's Redeemer). This is the typical response to the gospel. When **the Jewish** leaders heard **Stephen's** masterful speech in defense of the Good News, **they were cut to the heart** (literally *sawed in half*). **And began gnashing their teeth at him (7:54)**. The gospel makes people angry because it confronts them with their false religion, and their sin, and it forces them to recognize the inadequacy of their world view, exposing the emptiness of their lifestyle.

The second characteristic of the riot was confusion: As the frenzied rioters swarmed through **Ephesus, the city was filled with confusion**. Then surging through the main streets, **they** came down the hill where **the mob rushed into the open-air theater**, which could seat 25,000 people. Many didn't have any idea what all the confusion was about, but they joined **the mob**. They didn't want to miss whatever was happening. Unable to find Paul, they **dragged with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were travel companions of Paul (19:29)**.



The theater in Ephesus where Paul faced the mob.

When **he** heard what was happening, **Paul was wanted to enter among the crowd, but the disciples would not let him**. He wanted to face that howling **mob** even though it could mean certain death. This is the background of **Paul's** comment in **his** letter to **the Corinthians**, "**For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of our trouble that happened in Asia. We were under great pressure - so far beyond our strength that we despaired even of living. In fact, we had within ourselves the death sentence - so that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead**" (Second Corinthians 1:8-9). **But some of the high-ranking government officials of Asia, being his friends, sent a message to him and insisted over Paul's protest, begging him not to surrender himself in the theater**. In so doing, **they** probably saved **Paul's** life. **Now some of the mob continually cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in utter**

confusion. Most did not know why they had come together (19:30-32).

The third characteristic of the riot was closed-mindedness: Some of the unbelieving **Jews**, fearing that **the mob** might turn on **them** as well, **solicited Alexander** to try and explain that **they** didn't believe in **Yeshua**. **He motioned with his hand to the crowd** because **he wished to offer a defense to the crowd**, but never got a chance. **The mob** might have **recognized that he was Jewish**, but it made little difference. To the pagan crowd, both **Christians** and **Jews** worshiped an invisible **God**, and both rejected idolatry. **Their** minds were closed to whatever **Alexander** might have said.⁴⁷² Instead, **they** drowned **him** out and **for about two hours they all with one voice cried out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians,"** not letting **Alexander** speak at all **(19:33-34)!**



Third, the calming of the riot: Finally, **after two hours** of riotous confusion, order was restored by **the town clerk**. As the chairman of the city government (the equivalent of the mayor of a modern city) and liaison between the city council and the Roman authorities, **he** was the leading citizen of **Ephesus**. As such, **he** knew the Romans would hold **him** personally responsible for what happened. After **quieting the crowd** because **his** presence demanded respect, **he** said: **Men of Ephesus, what man is there who doesn't know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis and of her image fallen from heaven? Since these things are undeniable, you must be calm and do nothing reckless. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor revilers of our goddess.** Even this pagan official testified to the character of **Paul** and **his Macedonians** traveling companions **(19:29)**, **they** were not thieves, nor did **they** use insulting language. Despite the claims of **Demetrius**, **they** had not acted improperly. Having reassured the crowd, **he** next criticized **Demetrius and the**

craftsmen for sparking the riot. Rather than resorting to **mob** violence, **they** should have followed the due process of the law.⁴⁷³ After all, **he** reminded **them**, if **they had a complaint against anyone, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. Let them accuse them. But if you seek anything further, it will be settled in the lawful assembly.** This assembly was clearly an unlawful one. Ephesus was permitted by Rome to exist as a “free city” with its own elected representatives. But if riots were to occur, Rome would move in and reestablish order and with it, Roman taxes. Therefore, **the town clerk** concluded **his** speech with a sobering warning: **For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, there being no reason which we are able to give to justify this mob. Upon saying this, he dismissed the assembly and they went quietly (19:35-41).** The same tactics that **the silversmiths** used to arouse **the mob, the town clerk** used to quiet and reassure **them** – the greatness of **their** city and **their goddess.**

Luke records the official statement that **the believers** were innocent of any crime, either public (**19:27**) or private (**19:38**). **Paul** had this same kind of “official approval” in **Philippi (16:35-40)** and in **Corinth (18:12-17)**, and **he** would receive it again after **his** arrest in **Jerusalem.** Throughout the book of **Acts, Luke** makes it clear that the persecution of the Church was incited by unbelieving **Jews**, not by the Romans. In anything, **Paul** used **his** Roman citizenship to protect **himself, his** friends, and the local congregations of **God.**

The crowd was dismissed, and no doubt **the people** went home congratulating **themselves** that **they** had successfully defended **their** great city and **their** famous **goddess.** It is doubtful that any of **them** questioned the truthfulness for **their** devotion to **Artemis** or determined to investigate what **Paul** had been preaching for three years. It was much easier to believe a lie and follow **the crowd.**

But **Ephesus** is gone, and so is the worldwide worship of **Artemis of the Ephesians.** The city and the temple are gone, and **the silversmith’s** guild is gone. **Ephesus** is a place visited primarily by archeologists and people on Holy Land tours. Yet the gospel of **God’s** grace and the Church of **Jesus Christ** are still here! We have four inspired letters that were sent to **the believers** in **Ephesus - Ephesians, First and Second Timothy,** and **Revelation 2:1-7.** The name of **Paul** is honored, but the name of **Demetrius** is forgotten (were it not for **Paul,** we would have never heard of **Demetrius** in the first place)!

The Church ministers by persuasion, not propaganda. We share **ADONAI’s** truth, not mankind’s religious lies. Our motive is love, not anger; and the glory of **God,** not the praise of mankind. We have an audience of **One.** This is why the Church goes on, and we must keep it so.⁴⁷⁴