

10.27

Acts 19:23–41—Temple of Artemis

The temple of Artemis sat on a platform 400 feet long and 240 feet wide. The building itself was larger than a modern football field: 360 feet long and 180 feet wide. It had more than 120 columns, each of which was over 55 feet tall and gilded with gold and silver. A peaked roof rested atop the columns.

The temple that existed in New Testament times was actually the third one on that site. It had been constructed in the late fourth century BCE, the work having begun in 323. Literary sources describe the temple as being richly adorned with paintings and sculptures by some of the most renowned artists of antiquity.

In the second century BCE, Antipater of Sidon compiled a list of the seven wonders of the world, including the Temple of Artemis among them. He offers this comment:

I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the Sun, and the huge labor of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, “Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand.” (*Greek Anthology* 9.58)

The book of Acts reports that some Ephesians feared the temple could be endangered by the success of Christian evangelism:

About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, "Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her."

When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travel companions. Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theater. Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd gave instructions to Alexander, whom the Jews had

pushed forward. And Alexander motioned for silence and tried to make a defense before the people. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours all of them shouted in unison, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" But when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven? Since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. You have brought these men here who are neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the artisans with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges there against one another. If there is anything further you want to know, it must be settled in the regular assembly. For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." When he had said this, he dismissed the assembly. (Acts 19:23–41)

Acts of John, a second-century apocryphal book, includes a tale of the temple's destruction: the apostle John prayed publicly in the Temple of Artemis, exorcising its demons and "of a sudden the altar of Artemis split in many pieces . . . and half the temple fell down," instantly converting the Ephesians, who wept, prayed or took flight.¹ This, of course, did not actually happen: numerous sources describe the temple as intact for some time after the lifetime of John and other apostles.

In 262 CE, however, the Temple of Artemis was destroyed in a raid by the Goths, who set it aflame.

1. Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire AD 100–400* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984), 26.