

PAUL TREBILCO

The Early Christians
in Ephesus
from Paul to Ignatius

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament*

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Mohr Siebeck

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*For Fiona, Stephen,
David and Philip*

Preface

My interest in Ephesus was originally prompted by Professor James Dunn's suggestion that this was an area that had been overlooked in New Testament Studies. This dovetailed well with my hope that I could build in some way on earlier work on Jewish communities in Asia Minor and also tied in to my interest in unity and diversity in the New Testament, an interest that was originally stimulated by reading Jimmy's book of that title as an undergraduate. I am enormously grateful to Jimmy for his encouragement as I have worked away on this project.

In working on this book I am also hugely in the debt of Professor John Barclay. John has spent many hours talking about this project with me, and I have greatly appreciated his wisdom and insight.

I have spent rather too long on this book, including two periods of research leave and much time in between. The foundations of the project were laid in 1994 when I spent seven months at Tyndale House, Cambridge, and then five months as a visiting scholar at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Durham. From July 2001 to June 2002, I was a visiting scholar at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Glasgow. I am exceedingly grateful to each of these institutions for their hospitality and their excellent libraries. I am particularly grateful to Dr Bruce Winter, Professor James Dunn and Professor John Barclay respectively for making these periods of leave so enjoyable and worthwhile.

I am very grateful to the University of Otago for these periods of research leave, and for various research grants that have assisted with this work. I am also enormously grateful to my PhD student, Chris Caradus, who has produced the camera ready copy for this book, and undertaken the laborious task of proofreading and constructing the indices. His unfailing patience has been greatly appreciated.

Chapters or sections of this book have been presented at conferences or seminars at a variety of institutions, particularly in Britain and Australia. I am very grateful for the responses received, which have helped to refine my thoughts. I am also very grateful to those who have read portions of this work, or who have spent time discussing it with me. In addition to Jimmy Dunn and John Barclay, I would particularly like to thank Professors Graham Stanton, Richard Bauckham and Wayne Meeks, and Dr Steve Walton.

I have taught a postgraduate paper based around this research several times here at the University of Otago, and am very grateful to the students who have focussed my thinking by their astute questions and responses to my material.

My heartfelt thanks go to Professor Jörg Frey, editor of the WUNT series in which this book appears and to Dr Henning Ziebritzki of Mohr Siebeck, for being willing to accept this book for publication. Professor Frey's detailed comments on an earlier draft of the book were exceedingly insightful, and have helped me to clarify and sharpen my argument in many places. Of course, all the oversights and errors of judgement that remain are mine! I am also very grateful to Ilse König for her assistance in the publication process.

I am grateful to Eerdmans for permission to revise and incorporate into sections 1 and 2 of Chapter 1 material that was originally published in *The Book of Acts in its Greco-Roman Setting* and to Dr Bruce Winter, the editor of *Tyndale Bulletin* for permission to reprint here as Chapter 12, in slightly revised form, two articles which were published in volumes 53.2 (2002) and 54.1 (2003) of that journal.

My wife Gill has been a loving and constant companion and support while I have been writing this book. I am enormously grateful for all she has done over many years whilst I have been (metaphorically) in Ephesus! I dedicate this book to our four children, Fiona, Stephen, David and Philip, with love and profound gratitude for all they have added to our lives.

Paul Trebilco
December, 2003
University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

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Introduction

1. The significance of the early Christians in Ephesus

It is my contention that the life of the early Christians in Ephesus sheds a good deal of light on early Christianity in general.¹ As we will see a number of leading personalities of early Christianity have a connection with Ephesus and the range of New Testament and early Christian texts which are linked with Ephesus is probably greater than that for any other city in which there was an early Christian community.

Ephesus was also the capital of the province of Asia and the leading city of Asia Minor, where the church grew very rapidly. There is no doubting the importance of the church in Asia Minor in the first two centuries. Paul spent a considerable period of time in Asia Minor and Luke devoted a significant amount of Acts to Paul's travels in this region. That the early Church grew very quickly in Asia Minor is shown by the number of centres in which, according to our evidence, the early church became established by the end of the second century.² Thus, Aune notes that "In the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem following the first Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-73, Anatolia had become perhaps the most important geographical center of Christianity in the ancient world."³

As the leading city of the province of Asia, and a key city in the wider area of Asia Minor, Ephesus clearly has a significant place in early Christianity. A number of scholars have recognized that Ephesus was a very important centre of early Christianity. For example, von Harnack saw Ephesus as the "third capital of Christianity" and added that "for a while it looked as if Ephesus was actually destined to be the final headquarters of the faith."⁴ Beasley-Murray notes that: "the church in Ephesus was the most important in Asia

¹ For bibliography on Ephesus see Oster 1987.

² See Oster 1992b, p938-54.

³ Aune 1997, p131. Frend (1984, p38) notes that the province of Asia was "the main centre of Christianity for a century and a half after the Pauline mission". On p127 he writes: "The province of Asia emerged as the area where Christianity was strongest, with Ephesus as its radial point."

⁴ von Harnack 1908, p76. It would be the third capital after Jerusalem and Antioch.

Minor, and possibly the most influential church in the world at the end of the first century AD.”⁵

Despite those who have recognised the importance of Ephesus for early Christianity (see section 2. below), the study of the early Christians in Ephesus has been somewhat overlooked by New Testament scholarship.⁶ The focus has often been on particular issues connected with Ephesus, such as whether Paul was imprisoned in the city,⁷ the relationship of particular documents to Ephesus,⁸ studies of the broader questions of unity and diversity in early Christianity.⁹ These issues have been important in their own right, but the broader picture of the life of the early Christians in Ephesus has not been given the prominence it deserves. Further, since we have a wealth of archaeological data available from the city, Ephesus offers the opportunity to develop a portrayal of the life of the early Christians in the context of all we know about the life of a major Greco-Roman city.

2. Recent Research on the early Christians in Ephesus

Recently, there have been some significant studies of Christians in Ephesus. Whilst the work of these scholars will be noted or discussed at the appropriate points, some more general, brief comments are appropriate here.¹⁰

Günther (1995) is the most comprehensive of recent treatments of Christians in Ephesus. After dealing with introductory issues, he discusses Ephesian Christianity in particular periods: from 41-54 CE (including the Pauline mission), to the end of Domitian’s reign (96 CE, including Acts 20 and 2-3 Jn), from 98-117 CE (including Rev 2:1-7, Cerinthus and Ignatius), and from 118 to 197 CE (Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, and other evidence from Eusebius). Whilst there is much of value in his work, in my view many of his conclusions do not stand up to scrutiny. For example, he does not think a Pauline community became established in Ephesus at all, but rather that

⁵ Beasley-Murray 1974, p73; he goes on “... It is comprehensible that teachers of many kinds and of every shade of doctrine were drawn to Ephesus, to seek the patronage of the church and to influence its ways.”

⁶ This contrasts with the number of studies devoted to other cities and regions, most notably Antioch, Rome, Corinth and Egypt. For a discussion of previous work on Christians in Ephesus see Günther 1995, p4-12.

⁷ See Chapter 2, section 3.

⁸ This relates particularly to John’s Gospel.

⁹ For example Christianity in Ephesus was important in Bauer’s analysis (1971, p67-94) and in Robinson’s response (1988).

¹⁰ There have been a number of other significant articles or books devoted to our topic; see for example Lemcio 1986; Mussies 1990; Schnackenburg 1991; Horsley 1992a; Fieger 1998. On recent work on Ephesus see also Schnabel 1999, p349-82.

Apollos was *the* key founding figure,¹¹ he views the Acts material as unreliable, and argues that 1 Jn cannot be used as evidence for Ephesian Christians (whilst 2-3 Jn can be).¹² On these points (and a number of others), I think the evidence argues in a different direction.¹³ This means that overall, quite different conclusions about the nature of the life of the early Christians in Ephesus need to be drawn.

In his 1995 book, Thiessen looks only at Paul's mission in Ephesus and the Pastoral Epistles. He discusses issues of method, works through the Acts material in detail, and then discusses the Pastoral Epistles, paying attention to issues such as their connection with Ephesus and the historical situation of post-Pauline Christianity including matters such as leadership, social stratification and the position of the opponents. He concludes with a discussion of the struggle within post-Pauline Christianity at Ephesus over Pauline tradition. Much of what he says is valuable, but from our perspective, the fact that he does not draw on other early Christian literature (the Johannine letters, Revelation, Ignatius' letter) in his discussion of the life of the Christians in Ephesus, means that much else remains to be said about the topic of "Christen in Ephesus".¹⁴

Strelan (1996) discusses the significance of Artemis and other cults in Ephesus, and then against this background, explores Paul's mission in Ephesus, drawing on Acts and Paul's letter. He argues that in Ephesus Paul made little progress in converting Gentiles; rather Paul had success largely among Jews with the result that his Christian community in Ephesus was composed primarily of Jews, to the extent that we should speak of "Pauline Jewish Christianity" in Ephesus.¹⁵ However, as we will argue, Acts suggests that the Pauline Christian community in Ephesus consisted of significant numbers of both Jews and Gentiles. Further, Rom 9-11 (especially 9:31; 10:1-4; 11:1f), written shortly after Paul's time in Ephesus, suggests that Paul thought his mission to Jews was largely unsuccessful. This does not mean that Paul did not convert a number of Jews, but it does undermine the view that suggests that Paul's community in Ephesus was predominantly Jewish, as

¹¹ Although note that he thinks the community founded by Apollos did not endure, and the Christian community in Ephesus was refounded by the Elder John of 2-3 Jn after 70 CE.

¹² For these points see Günther 1995, p52-3, 54-9; 53-67 and 108-111 respectively.

¹³ See the critical reviews of Günther's book in Roloff 1997, p143-5; Schnabel 1999, p354-6. Roloff (1997, p144) asks two pertinent questions of Günther's treatment of Paul. Firstly, why did Paul stay so long in Ephesus, if his mission there was a total failure, as Günther thinks? And secondly, if Apollos did found the community in Ephesus, why, in light of Rom 15:20, did Paul attempt a mission there?

¹⁴ For a review of Thiessen's book, including critical comments on his view of the Pastors, see Roloff 1997, p142-3.

¹⁵ Strelan 1996, p295.

Strelan believes.¹⁶ Further, it is also a limitation of his work that he only discusses the material relating to Paul's mission and Acts.

Koester's works (1995 and 1999) about Ephesus are quite brief. Whilst I take a different view on some matters from him (for example, I will argue that the Acts account is historically valuable, and that the communities addressed in 1-3 Jn are to be located in and around Ephesus), his portrayal of the diversity of early Christianity in Ephesus is helpful, although I will eventually reconstruct the range of communities differently.

In my view then, the overall picture of the life of the early Christians in Ephesus can be clarified in more detail and in a different way than has been done hitherto. This is the task attempted here.

3. The aims of this book

In this book I will investigate the life of the Christians in Ephesus from the founding of the community in the city to the early second century. Clearly, the founding of the community is the obvious place to begin. The letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians, written around 105-110 CE, is the obvious point to conclude this study because, after this, there is very little information about Christians in Ephesus until the end of the second century.¹⁷ The context for this investigation is the history and significance of Ephesus and of its religious life, including its Jewish community, in the first century from archaeological and literary sources. Accordingly, this is addressed in Chapter 1.

Clearly, a crucial issue is which documents relate to the Christians in Ephesus, and how reliable is the information they provide. We will outline below which books we think relate to Ephesus and will provide detailed argument for these views at the appropriate points.

The book has two main aims. The first is the descriptive task of attempting to outline what our sources tell us about the life and activity of the early Christians in Ephesus. Thus in Part One we will discuss Paul and his mission in the city as this is portrayed in his letters and Acts. In Part Two I will

¹⁶ Further, Strelan's view (1996, p303-6) that by the phrase "the apostle to τὰ ἔθνη" Paul meant "apostle to those Jews living in those areas outside of Judea, or outside of Israel" (1996, p306) is very unlikely, particularly in the light of Gal 2:7-10. His treatment of Acts 19:10 (1996, p255-7) and 19:26 (1996, p137-9) is also very unconvincing. For further critique see Barclay 1998, p260-3.

¹⁷ For a discussion of possible sources in the second century see Günther 1995, p161-204. On the earliest Christian inscriptions from Ephesus, which date to the 3rd century, see Antonopoulou 1999, p170-2. She notes there are 291 Christian inscriptions from the third century to 614 CE. On the earliest non-inscriptional material remains of Christianity in Ephesus see Foss 1979, p36. On Christianity in the third to fifth century see Foss 1979, p33-44.

discuss the Pastorals, the Johannine Letters and Revelation. I will present the case for linking these documents with Ephesus and for their dating. I will also discuss the views of various groups associated with Ephesus which emerge from these documents and which the respective authors regard as “beyond the pale”. These are the Pastor’s opponents in 1 and 2 Timothy, the “secessionists” who have left the community addressed in 1 Jn and the “Nicolaitans” spoken of in Revelation 2.

The second aim of the book is to present the argument that, apart from the very earliest period, there was never a single “Christian community in Ephesus”. Rather, I will argue that there were different groups or communities of Christians in the city, and I will seek to describe in detail some facets of the life of these different groups. This emerges in Part Two, in which I discuss the various groups that are addressed by authors, or against whom the respective authors argue. But in Part Three I address this issue more directly and seek to demonstrate that the Pastoral Epistles and the Johannine Letters are not addressed to the same group of Christians (over some 20 years), but rather are addressed to different groups of readers. However, I will argue that John in Revelation is seeking to address both groups, and perhaps others as well, although he is aware that some of his readers may well not listen to his message. This will be argued in Part Three of the book by examining the situation of the readers of the Pastorals, the Johannine Letters and Revelation with regard to a range of issues, as these are expressed by the various authors. The issues examined are the relationship between Christians and the wider community in which they lived, material possessions, leadership and the locus of authority, the situation of women, and the terms used as “labels” for self-designation. These issues have been chosen because they can be seen as significant dimensions of the identity of a group and because they are issues on which there is sufficient evidence for comparative purposes.¹⁸ By discussing these issues, I will also be building up a description of the life of these particular communities.

In a final chapter in Part Three, I will seek to argue that the readers of the Pastoral Epistles and the readers of the Johannine Epistles were not antagonistic towards one another and would have seen each other as part of the same wider movement, even if they also wished to maintain the integrity of their separate groups. I will also discuss further how John the Seer relates to the Pauline tradition in order to reinforce the argument that John is writing to all the Christians in Ephesus.

¹⁸ It would be interesting to be able to discuss issues such as the ethnic make up of the readers of these documents, the readers’ attitude towards Israel as the people of God and towards the Jewish law. But the evidence is insufficient across the three sets of documents to allow a comparison to be made on these issues.

In the two Chapters in Part Four I will return to the descriptive exercise and will discuss what Ignatius tells us about the life of the Christians he addresses in Ephesus. I will also argue that he is seeking to address and to unify all the Christians in Ephesus. A brief concluding chapter will seek to bring together the various matters we have discussed and, on the basis of what we have discussed about the life of the Christian communities in Ephesus, will make some observations relating to the ongoing debate about commonality and diversity in earliest Christianity.

4. Which New Testament documents are connected with Ephesus?

Whilst we do not have a long letter like Romans addressed to Ephesus, the range and number of documents which have some connection to Ephesus makes it a fruitful city for investigation. However, part of the difficulty of studying this topic is the problem of which NT documents have a verifiable connection with Ephesus. That the following documents are (or are not) connected with Ephesus will be argued at the appropriate points, where the dating will also be discussed. Here we simply note the documents which provide our primary evidence.

Clearly Paul preached in Ephesus and wrote about his experiences in the city, primarily in 1 Cor. Secondly, Luke writes about Paul's mission in Acts, and although this material needs to be examined for its historical reliability, I will argue that we gain much valuable information about the earliest Christians in Ephesus from this source. Thirdly, I will argue that 1 and 2 Timothy were written to Ephesus between 80-100 CE;¹⁹ opponents are clearly in view in these letters. Fourthly, tradition associates the Johannine literature with Ephesus and I will argue that a strong case can be made for this geographical location. However, I will argue that we cannot use John's Gospel as evidence for a Johannine community in the city, since I have been convinced by recent arguments that the Gospels were written for all Christians and that we cannot deduce the history and life of a particular community from a Gospel. However, I will argue that 1-3 Jn can be used as evidence for the life of a "Johannine community" in Ephesus, and that we also learn of opponents of this community from these books.

Fifthly, the letter in Rev 2:1-7 is written to Ephesian Christians, and the rest of Revelation has Ephesian Christians in view, along with those in six other cities in western Asia Minor. We also learn from Rev 2:1-7 of the Nicolaitans. Finally, Ignatius wrote a letter to the Christians in Ephesus and again opponents are in view.

¹⁹ Titus purports to be written to Crete (Tit 1:5).

A number of other documents of the NT have been associated with Ephesus by various scholars, but in my view the connection is too uncertain for them to be used in this study. Firstly, although it is likely that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus, that he wrote any of the prison epistles (Phil, Col, Philemon) from Ephesus must be regarded as less than likely because the imprisonment itself is conjectural, some points argues against an Ephesian setting for these letters, and the data taken to argue for an Ephesian provenance can all be interpreted in other ways. Secondly, it is possible that Galatians was written from Ephesus, although it could have been written from Corinth, or at an earlier stage in Paul's ministry. But even if it was written in Ephesus, it would add little to our evidence for Paul's ministry in the city. Thirdly, a number of scholars have regarded Romans 16 as a separate letter which was originally addressed to Ephesus, but strong arguments have been given against this view. Fourthly, there is general agreement that in the letter now known as "To the Ephesians" the phrase "*ἐν Ἐφέσῳ*" in Eph 1:1 was not part of the original text. Accordingly, it cannot be used as evidence for the life of Christians in the city.²⁰ Fifthly, we will suggest that, although the first collection of Paul's letters may have occurred in Ephesus as part of the work of a "Pauline school", the evidence for this is not sufficiently strong for us to build on this possibility here.

Sixthly, Goodspeed argued that Luke/Acts was written in Ephesus primarily for Ephesian readers.²¹ However, the evidence for this is very tenuous²² and it remains unlikely. Sixthly, 1 Peter is addressed to Christians in Asia Minor (1 Peter 1:1), but given that its recipients were a circle of churches who lived in a wide geographical area, we cannot use it as evidence for the situation of Christians in Ephesus.²³ Finally, some scholars have suggested that Apollos wrote Hebrews, perhaps from Ephesus, which would mean that it might tell us something about the Christians in the city.²⁴ However this view is purely conjectural and has won little support,²⁵ and so Hebrews cannot be used here.

²⁰ The first five issues discussed here are covered in more detail in Chapter 2.

²¹ Goodspeed, 1937, p27; see also Cook 1981, p15; Berger 1995, p755-65.

²² Goodspeed notes the amount of space devoted to Ephesus and that Paul's only extended farewell to any of his churches is to the elders of Ephesus. However, neither factor need imply that Luke/Acts was written in Ephesus.

²³ Streeter (1926, p104, 131-4) and Weiss (1937, Vol 2, p685, 786) see Ephesus as the place of origin of 1 Peter. But this view has gained little support.

²⁴ See the list in Attridge 1989, p4 n28 and for example Montefiore 1964, p9-31. On Montefiore's view, Apollos wrote Hebrews after he had returned to Ephesus from the visit he made to Corinth recorded in Acts 19:1 and while Paul was away from Ephesus on the journey described in Acts 18:20-23.

²⁵ See Attridge 1989, p4; Barrett 1968, p8-11.

5. What makes a group a group?

In the course of this book, and especially in Parts Three and Four, we will often discuss a particular “group” or “community”, terms which we use synonymously. Elliott offers a very helpful definition of a “group”:

“The most generically inclusive term denoting a set of two or more individuals who are in reciprocal communication. Social groups are composed of persons whose relationship with one another are a consequence of an interrelated set of statuses and roles. Groups vary in size, duration, stability, mode of contact, objectives, manner of admission, formality, role prescriptions, degree of acquaintance among members, sanctions, etc., and can view themselves as ‘in-groups’ in contrast to ‘out-groups’ (‘we’ vs ‘they’) from which they distinguish themselves and for which they feel antipathy.”²⁶

Further Elliott defines an “in –group” as “Any set of persons whose members perceive themselves as sharing the same distinctive interests and values and as constituting a collective ‘we’ over against nonmembers or ‘out-groups’ designated as ‘they,’ often with negative valuation.”²⁷

As these definitions imply, a crucial feature of a group is what its members share, or perceive themselves as having in common. This leads on to the question of what features or particular characteristics make a group distinctive? With regard to the sort of “groups” of early Christians that we are discussing here, we suggest that it is helpful to think of the shared features and characteristics, which can all be seen as facets of group identity, as including some of the following:²⁸

- a sense of commitment to the group as an entity that must be joined and in which members continue to experience a sense of belonging and some form of shared social life;
- group boundaries of some sort (often defined by many of the characteristics on this list) and ways of maintaining them;
- in connection with boundaries, at least some sense of “us” and “them”, and some understanding of attitudes to and interactions with “them”;

²⁶ Elliott 1993, p130.

²⁷ Elliott 1993, p130. He defines an “out-group” (1993, p132) as “Any set of persons that is perceived by members of an in-group as holding different or competing interests and values from those of the in-group and that is designated by in-group members as ‘they,’ often with negative valuation.” Botha (1996, p263) quotes the following definition of a group from Olmsted and Hare: “a plurality of individuals who are in contact with one another, who take one another into account and who are aware of some significant commonality. An essential feature of a group is that its members have something in common and that they believe what they have in common makes a difference.”

²⁸ Some of these characteristics have been derived from Elliott 1993, p110-121 who gives a “Data inventory for synchronic social analysis of early Christian groups.” See further Meeks 1983, p74-192; Botha 1996, p262-8; Elliott 1998, p273-313; Barton 1998, p174-6.

- common beliefs and perspectives, including ways of legitimating their existence as a distinct group;
- patterns of behaviour;
- shared rituals of various sorts, including rituals for entry into the group and forms of worship;
- shared attitudes and values;
- distinctive language and symbols, including language for self-designation;
- distinctive world views and some form of shared narrative;
- loyalty to a particular tradition, and/or to particular people;
- some form of leadership and group structure or organisation;
- some understanding of the locus of authority;
- mechanisms for group discipline and for the management of internal conflict.

Of course, not all groups will exhibit all of these features, and not all group members will share all of the characteristics of the group as a whole.

When I use the term “group” or “community” of, for example, the readers of a particular document, I am suggesting first of all that the members of the “group” would identify themselves as belonging to that particular group. There is a strong sense of group consciousness then. Secondly, I am suggesting that we can analyse the group with regard to at least some of the features or characteristics listed above. Thirdly, I am suggesting that the members of a group would identify themselves as belonging to one particular group (Group “A”) and not to another (Group “B”), and that the two groups, A and B, would be distinguishable because they would show differences with regard to at least some of the above features and characteristics.

This raises the question of when the differences with regard to features and characteristics are sufficient to say that the readers of two documents constitute two different “groups”? Of course this is clearest when documents themselves tell us that “we are one group and they are another” (though whether the perception is shared by the other “group” may be a different matter). This will be the case with “opponents” such as John the Seer’s opponents, the Nicolaitans. Having seen that they are a “group”, we can go on to discuss what makes them distinctive.

But sometimes a document does not address or say anything about the particular “other group” that we suspect is present in the locality. In one of the cases we are concerned with here, that of the readers of the Pastorals and of the Johannine Letters, each document has nothing to say about the readers of the other, and perhaps of course these documents could be to the same group but from different times (or to different groups in different places). But in this sort of case, we need to ask whether the two sets of documents are to the one group or not, and clearly this becomes a matter of judgement and of weighing the evidence. However, when two potentially different groups

register quite differently with regard to a range of the above features and characteristics, we can suggest that we are actually observing two different groups.

In seeking to show that there are different “groups” of Christians in Ephesus, we will be analysing some of these shared features and characteristics of groups. Not all of these features will be accessible to us. In particular, from the documents we have we can ascertain some features of the theology of the *authors* concerned, but we are often unable to ascertain the theology of the group of *readers* addressed. Did the group share the author’s theology, or did they reject that theology, or misunderstand it? Often we cannot tell. But, we *are* able to discern some of these characteristics with regard to the addressees of our particular documents from what the respective authors say. As noted above, we have analysed particular characteristics because in these cases there is sufficient information for us to be able to make comparisons.

We turn now to Chapter 1, in which I will discuss various facets of the history and significance of the city of Ephesus, and some significant dimensions of its religious life. This forms the context for our study of the earliest Christians in the city.

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