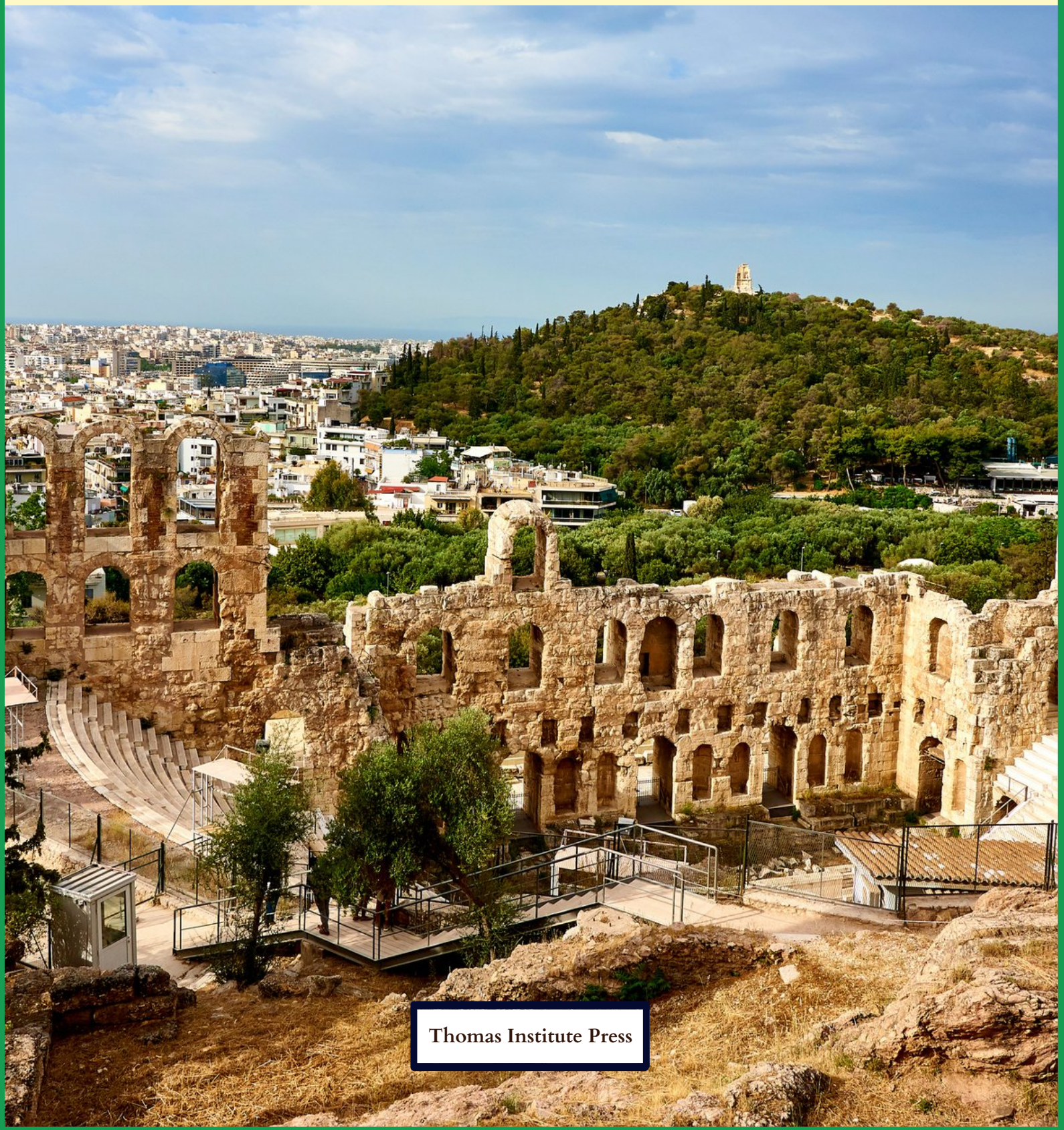
# Major Biblical Sites to Visit in Greece



Thomas Institute Press

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Ancient Greek society lasted thousands of years and witnessed unprecedented advances and innovations. Its influence on the world of the Bible and early Christianity cannot be overestimated.


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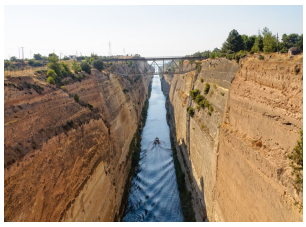
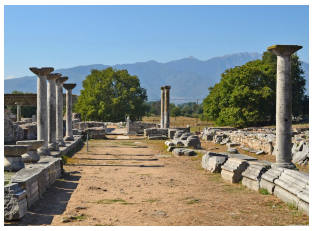
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## The Cradle of Christianity

"Ah, so that's why the New Testament was written in Greek!" That's what someone in our group stated as it dawned on them at the archaeological site in Philippi that Greece was a big deal in biblical history. When most people think of the geography of the Bible, they think of Israel. But that's a big mistake, especially when it comes to the New Testament. That's because most of the New Testament was actually written to Christians in Greece and Turkey, not Israel. This fact also clarifies how the Bible came to be written in Greek rather than Hebrew or even Latin.



Sensing a teaching moment in Philippi as someone stated this, I took a few minutes to explain to everyone some of the history related to the Greek language, starting with the geography of Greece. Although this location is oftentimes called "the cradle of [western] civilization," it could also easily be called "the cradle of Christianity," for it influenced the development of the church in countless ways.

## Two Kinds of Sites in Greece



Believe it or not, there are nearly twenty biblical sites in Greece. When it comes to biblical sites in Greece, there are two general categories: (1) traditional sites where ancient tradition holds that specific biblical events took place and (2) historical sites that illuminate the life of biblical and early Christians.

These latter sites—though not sites where a biblical event necessarily took place—are still very much worth visiting and often justly appear on "Biblical Greece" tours. In this booklet, I will only discuss traditional sites. However, I highly recommend visiting as many other sites as possible in Greece, especially since they will certainly enhance your understanding of the biblical world.



## Five Most Popular Biblical Sites

Let's start with the most traditional biblical sites in Greece. Because Greece is such a large country, these sites can be separated by hundreds of miles. This helps gives context to biblical history in which people traveled hundreds of miles by foot or sea to get from place to place. In a world before the invention of modern technology like cars, trains, and planes, it is humbling to imagine how physically strenuous Christianity was thousands of years ago.

I will describe the five most popular biblical sites in Greece, but I will list minor ones below with less elaboration.



## (i) Athens

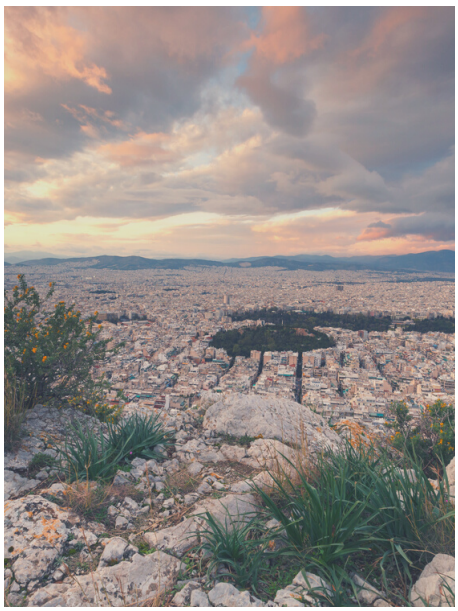
Athens was one of the greatest cities in the classical world. Some of the most influential people who have ever lived once called this magnificent city home: Aristotle, Hippocrates, Plato, Socrates, and Pericles. Politics, religion, art, architecture, philosophy, civic responsibility, public speaking, military strategy, medicine, and literature have all been profoundly influenced by Athenians.

The name "Athens" is directly connected to its protector, Athena, goddess of war and wisdom. The Parthenon, which means "virgin" in Greek, is the most iconic architectural image in the ancient world (well before another "virgin," the Virgin Mary, came to be so highly regarded). This temple was dedicated to the Virgin Athena 2,500 years ago, and it still stands today in the highest part of Athens, called the Acropolis, or "high city" in Greek. Everywhere you look in the *Plaka*, or "Old Town," you see the Acropolis towering magnificently over the town, and on the Acropolis is the Parthenon. It is an incredible sight to behold.



By the time the apostle Paul reached Athens around the year 50 AD, it was a provincial and backwater town that was well past its heyday. Still, it yielded tremendous historical value, and it was also a leading university city. While in Athens, Paul did what anyone would do—he went sightseeing. As he visited the historical sites, he was both repulsed by the rampant idolatry and mesmerized by the centuries-old architecture and remnant of legendary figures.

Acts 17 records Paul's time in Athens. Paul conversed daily in the *agora*, or "marketplace." Paul also ascended the Acropolis and came face-to-face with the (then) five-hundred-year-old Parthenon when discussing the risen Christ with local citizens. It was here on the Areopagus, also known as "Mars Hill," where Paul delivered his sermon about "an unknown God" (17:23). In ancient times, the Areopagus referred both to a specific location as well as to the body of figures who presided over it. The huge rock formation where the Areopagus met, and where Paul stood, sits just below the Acropolis.



Today, the Areopagus, or "Mars Hill," is on a slippery rock formation directly below the Acropolis. It only contains a mound of rocks, but it provides a wonderful setting from which to discuss Paul's sermon from Acts 17. It is usually crowded and easy to slip on the limestone covering the site.



## (ii) Corinth

The Corinth Canal is a little more than an hour's drive from Athens, and it provides a nice stop on the way to the site at Corinth. It is a very pleasant day trip. Today, Corinth is purely an archaeological site. There are no inhabitants. Ironically, though, Corinth was a very large and important city when Paul lived there.

Paul moved to Corinth around the year 50, and he stayed there eighteen months (Acts 18:11). This meant that he saw at least one of the Isthmian Games, which were a smaller version of the Olympic Games. Paul possibly chose Corinth to live because it offered great business opportunities for his profession as a tentmaker.

It may be surprising for you to hear that the Christians in Corinth received at least four letters from Paul, but only two have survived. A brief report of Paul's time in Corinth is recorded in Acts 18, but you can read both 1 and 2 Corinthians to learn more about Corinth and early Christianity. Paul left Corinth around the year 51 by taking a ship to Ephesus via Cenchrea, which is the harbor for Corinth.

Corinth is a great site that you will love visiting. It offers an excellent setting from which to literally walk in biblical history, and there are many sites there that will bring the Bible to life. Also in the site is a wonderful archaeological museum called Corinth Museum. Your entry pass includes the site and the museum, so be sure to make time for the latter.

## (iii) Philippi

Philippi is in the north of Greece, and this is the city that received Paul's letter to the Philippians. Philippi was an important Roman city in the Greco-Roman world, but today it is just an archaeological site. Part of its importance is due to its location along the so-called *Via Egnatia*, an ancient highway used by the Romans to travel.

Paul visited this city around the year 50. Paul's time in the city is recorded in Acts 16 and 20:1-6. There are many important stories that took place in Philippi, such as the conversion of Lydia, the story of the Philippian jailor, and the healing of a female slave.

The site contains a lot to see. It offers a great place to reflect upon Paul's time in the northern part of Greece as well as to better understand the social context from which he lived. A little distance away from the site is the traditional location of Lydia's baptism.

## (iv) Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki is the second-largest city in Greece. It lies in the north of the country and is a





convenient launching pad for visiting all the other biblical sites in mainland Greece outside of Athens and Corinth.

Paul visited Thessaloniki (in the Bible: Thessalonica) around the year 50 immediately after suffering disgrace at Philippi. Paul's stay there is narrated in Acts 17:1-15. But the city is most famous because it was to the Christians there that Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. This is very noteworthy because 1 and 2 Thessalonians are actually the earliest Christian letters ever written.

Paul probably spent a few months in Thessaloniki before things got too tense. He was preaching each week in the Jewish synagogue and upsetting many of the people. This motivated him to go to Berea and, from there, to Athens.

The archaeological site in Thessaloniki is right in the middle of the town, so it is easily accessible from anywhere in the city via public transportation. There is also a museum. And not too far outside of town is the Royal Tombs of Macedonia. Though not biblical history per se, it is certainly worth visiting.

## (v) Patmos

A tiny string of Greek islands, Patmos is a beautiful destination for pilgrims, adventurers, and beachgoers alike. According to an early tradition, the Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation in a cave on that island. Back then, of course, Patmos was a sparsely populated island in the middle of nowhere that Romans used as a place of banishment—a kind of modern-day Alcatraz.







Today, Patmos is becoming a popular destination, but it's still in the backwaters of the Aegean Sea. From Athens, a one-way voyage requires a whole day by ferry. A much better route involves hiring a private boat from Kuşadası—a wonderful vacation town on the coast of Turkey. The ride takes four hours each way, but you get stunning views of the ocean and nearby islands.

In Patmos, John received a vision of the last days "on the Lord's Day," that is, on Sunday. When I take groups to Patmos, I prepare them for the pilgrimage by reading Revelation aloud on the ferry and explaining the background of the story in between chapters. We get lost in the images of the Ancient of Days, strange beasts, and gold-paved streets.

And then later, when we enter the Cave of the Apocalypse, we read the last chapter in the very place the story was originally received and written. There, huddled in a small and shadowy cave, overlooking the sea, surrounded by candlelight, icons, and a faint whisper of the apostle's words, we are transported to holy ground.



## Seven Smaller Biblical Sites in Greece

There are a dozen sites that have some biblical significance in Greece in addition to the ones mentioned above. Below, I will only briefly mention seven of them. The details of the biblical history that took place at many of these sites is uncertain.

- **Berea**: There is precious little to see here in this town, now called Veria, which is about an hour's bus ride from Thessaloniki. Paul visited this town around the year 50, which is recorded in Acts 17:10-15. The site is not always visited, but there are a few archaeological remains as well as a museum.



- **Cenchrea**: This site is almost completely underwater. It served as the harbor or port to Corinth in Paul's day, and Paul set sail here when leaving Corinth. It is just a few miles from Corinth. There is almost no signage for the site, and all that remains is a Byzantine Church as well as a few other building remnants that are mostly submerged. The site is mentioned in Acts 18:18 and Romans 16:1. Famously, Paul cut his hair at this site for a vow.

- **Cos (Kos)**: This is a small island off the coast of Turkey. According to Acts 2:11, Paul spent one night on the island on his way to Rhodes.

- **Cos** (continued): It is not clear whether Paul stayed on board the ship or slept outdoors by the beach. The island does provide some excellent places to visit, especially the Asklepion shrine and a museum. If you are nearby, the island is definitely worth a stop.

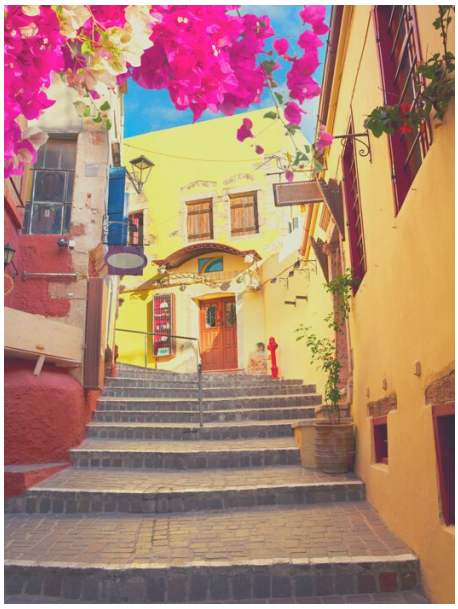
- **Crete**: This is one of the most famous islands in Greece, and it provides wonderful sites to visit. According to Acts 27:8, Paul docked at a harbor town called "Fair Havens." There is not much to see here, and the real site of interest is Knossos, which was most famous as the center of the Minoan civilization.

- **Neapolis**: This is the port of Philippi, and it is known today as Kavala. It is not clear if Paul performed any missionary work here. Most likely, he only used it to get to and from Philippi. Mention is made of the harbor in Acts 16:11 and 20:6.

- **Nicopolis**: This place, now just an archaeological site, used to boast a large and powerful Roman city. In Titus 3:2, Paul says that he spent the winter here. That makes sense since Nicopolis was a notable city in Greece that was on the coast and enjoyed warm weather.

- **Rhodes**: This island is one of the biggest and most famous in all of Greece. It contained the Colossus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It is closer to Turkey than mainland Greece and is usually an island visited by those taking cruises. The island is only mentioned in Acts 21:1 (though briefly also in Ezekiel 27:15). It is not clear where exactly Paul visited the island, so the real draws are the many ancient Greek archeological remains (in addition to the beaches).

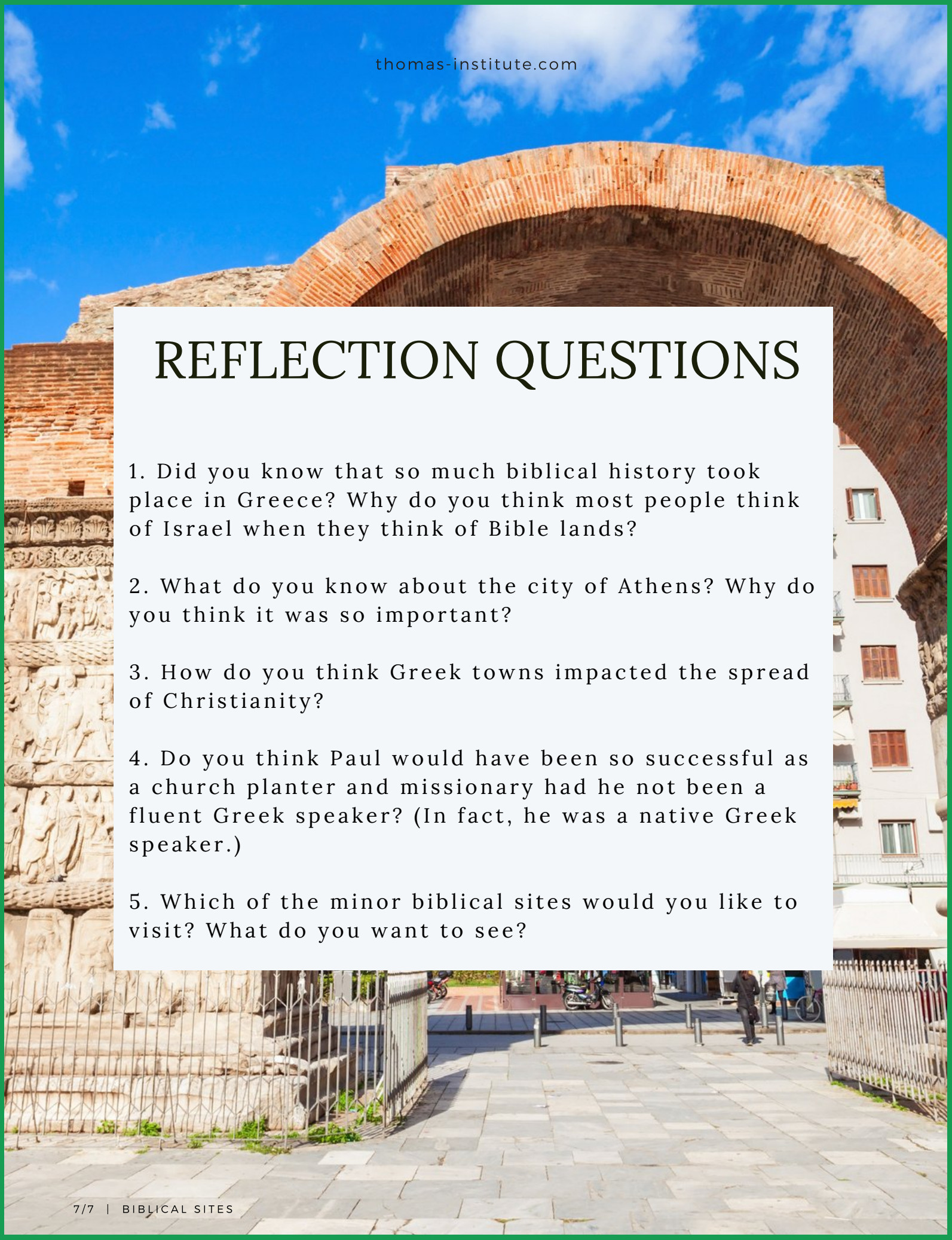






## Conclusion

In conclusion, Greece contains almost twenty biblical sites, and about half of all Paul's letters were written to Greek Christians at such places. As you visit them, the Bible will come alive in amazing ways, and you will gain a much deeper understanding on how to interpret the Bible as it was originally intended—on location—and, for our purposes, in Greece.



# REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Did you know that so much biblical history took place in Greece? Why do you think most people think of Israel when they think of Bible lands?

2. What do you know about the city of Athens? Why do you think it was so important?

3. How do you think Greek towns impacted the spread of Christianity?

4. Do you think Paul would have been so successful as a church planter and missionary had he not been a fluent Greek speaker? (In fact, he was a native Greek speaker.)

5. Which of the minor biblical sites would you like to visit? What do you want to see?



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