

## PERGAMUM

The Church in the Shadow of Satan's Throne: **Revelation 2:12-17**

### I. "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

A. **THE HISTORY OF PERGAMUM (BERGEMA)** Pergamum (Anatolia, Asia Minor now called Turkey) had a long history of resisting Greek rule. From Helen of Troy to Alexander the Great stood centuries of conflict. Pergamum became allies with Rome. When the fall of Greek power seemed inevitable & the Romans unbeatable, the local king of the city (Attalus III), "left Rome as his heir." Without war, the city became the capitol Rome in Asia Minor (Strabo 13.4.2). Most surrounding cities did the same. Competition existed between Ephesus; Smyrna & Pergamum for importance (Dio Chrystost. 34.48). Pergamum became the Roman capitol of Asia minor and first dedicated as a center for worship of the emperor. The city remained the capitol until Emperor Hadrian renamed Ephesus as the lead city for its port & commerce.<sup>1</sup>

### II. These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

### III. Religion In Pergamum:

- A. **Emperor Worship (Imperial Cult):** Above all, the city was a center for Imperial cult worship in Asia Minor. This was the great throne of Satan referred to in the letter and the greatest challenge to followers of Christ. Much language used for Christ was also used for the emperor (Son of God & Lord).
- B. **Athena:** Goddess of wisdom, warfare & Victory (Overcomer). Her brother Aries was the god of war with rage. Athena was the goddess of war and victory with strategic wisdom. The city Athens and its Parthenon is named after her. Next to the temple was the second largest library of the ancient world.
- C. **Zeus:** The largest altar outside of Rome. Zeus was only worshiped in Rome attesting to Pergamum's status as Rome's capitol of Asia Minor.<sup>2</sup>
- D. **Dionysus:** The god of wine, unrestrained festivity, sexuality & the theater. Every three years a major festival took place in Pergamum with wine and sexuality in excess
- E. **Asclepius:** Was a man of medicine. Myth took over and it was said Apollo had Zeus resurrect him as a god of healing. Asclepeion temples relied on prayers, rituals, potions and some medical treatment.

- 1. **Emperor Julian the Apostate (331-363)** ...the poor were neglected and overlooked by the priests, then I think the impious Galileans [Christians] observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy when they brought their sick to them. ...the result is that they have led very many into atheism. (Letter to an [Asklepion] Priest 305).<sup>3</sup>

### F. What does it look like being a follower of Christ in the Place where Satan Dwells and has his throne?

### IV. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

#### A. The Teachings of Balaam

- 1. (Numbers 22-24; 25:1-18; 31:16)
- 2. Numbers 31:16 Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, & so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD.
- 3. Balaam represents a person who appears spiritual but is simply seeking their personal gain. They are in the game for what they can get out of it. The church in Pergamum and the church today needs to choose their close relationships wisely. We don't want to be used or used again. Learn.
- 4. No one can keep you from God's best for your life except three enemies, me, myself and I.
- 5. **What does a person holding to the teaching of Balaam look like today?**

### V. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

#### A. The Nicolaitans taught loose living.<sup>4</sup>

- 1. The Nicolaitans "lived lives of unrestrained indulgence" (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1:26:3)

<sup>1</sup> Mark Wilson. *Biblical Turkey, A guide to the Jewish and Christians sites of Asia Minor*. Eerdmans Press, Grand Rapids, MI. 2013

Colin J. Hemer *The Letters of the Seven Churches of Asia in their local Setting*. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1989.

<sup>2</sup> In the mid 1800's German archaeologists excavated Pergamum and most of the finds, including the temple to Zeus are in their museums; The Berlin Museum and Pergamum Museum, Germany.

<sup>3</sup> Prof Emma J. J. Edelman. *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* Johns Hopkins University Press; Reprint edition (March 20, 1998)

<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 3rd ed. fully rev. and updated., vol. 1, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 75.

2. Clement of Alexandria, said that they ‘abandon themselves to pleasure like goats ... leading a life of self-indulgence’.<sup>5</sup>
3. There are, however, among the Gnostics diversities of opinion... The Nicolaitans are shameless in uncleanness... And when the disciples (of Nicolaus) continued to offer insult to the Holy Spirit, John reproved them in the Apocalypse as fornicators and eaters of things offered unto idols (Hippolytus of Rome, *Refutation of all Heresies* 7:24)<sup>6</sup>
4. It seems the Nicolaitans and those who hold to the teaching of Balaam were, in fact, one and the same. There is a play on words here. Nicolaus, could be derived from two Greek words, *nikan*, to conquer, and *laos*, the people. **Balaam** can be derived from two Hebrew words, *bela*, to conquer, and *ha’am*, the people. The two names, then, are the same, and both can describe an evil teacher, who has won victory over the people and brought them under the influence of poisonous heresy.<sup>7</sup>
5. **What does someone holding to the teaching of the Nicolaitans look like today?**

**VI. Repent! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.**

- A. **Repent:** To change your behavior in a new direction because you have come to understand it is wrong.
- B. **A Theology of Sexuality:** Our cities are filled with as many ½ truths and whole lies as the day this letter was written to Pergamum. It’s not enough to be a good person. People are offering a version of good that God has deemed perverse. Sex is not perverse but sexuality outside the boundaries and bonds God has given us is our undoing. **It’s not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Better to marry than burn with passion (1 Cor. 7:9). The young widow should remarry (1 Tim. 5:14) & (Pr. 5:18-19).**

**VII. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious νικάω, I will give some of the hidden manna. (God’s Word)**

- A. The word Nicolaitan (literally, “victor over the people”) is a wordplay on Revelation’s key word nikaō νικάω, “to be victorious, conquer” and translated “overcome” in the victor sayings.<sup>8</sup>
- B. If all meat in the market is dedicated to the Emperor Zeus or Athena how does one eat?
- C. **Hidden Manna:** To be fed and satisfied by the LORD in a wilderness so you did not go back to Egypt.

1. **Jewish Tradition:** A piece of unleavened bread is hidden for children to search and redeem a prize.

**VIII. I will also give that person a white stone (ψῆφος) with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.**

- A. (ψῆφος) can mean, “little-stone.”<sup>9</sup> However, Greeks and Romans used stones as votes:<sup>7</sup>
  1. “When the generals met and divided the stones τὰς ψήφους ... to determine who should be first and second, each voted ψήφον for himself” Herodotus, VIII, 123, 2. The word for small stone became synonymous for casting a “vote” or showing someone’s “voice” through voting.<sup>10</sup>
  2. The vote by small stone ψῆφος, ballot, must be distinguished from that by κύαμος (bean), lot; the former being used in trials, the latter in elections.<sup>11</sup> Types of votes distinguished the type of word they chose for voting. The white stone is in favor of a “yes” vote and given in trials and the new name gives the victor anonymity.
  3. **An example from Scripture: Acts 26:9-10** “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote (ψῆφος) against them.
  4. **The Latin word used in Rome for this small stone (ψῆφος) is “calculus”.** Counting that moved from votes to instruments of calculations to the modern use of math for complex calculations.<sup>12</sup>
  5. **Satan “accuser”** He uses lies and twists creation to deceive us into self-destructing ourselves.

**IX. CONCLUSION**

<sup>5</sup> William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 3rd ed. fully rev. and updated., vol. 1, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 75.  
<sup>6</sup> Hippolytus of Rome, “*The Refutation of All Heresies*,” in *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Cox, trans. J. H. MacMahon, vol. 5, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 115.  
<sup>7</sup> William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 3rd ed. fully rev. and updated., vol. 1, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 74–75.  
<sup>8</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Hebrews to Revelation*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 262.  
<sup>9</sup> Georg Braumann, “Ψῆφος, Ψηφίζω, Συψηφίζω (καταψηφίζομαι) Συγκραψηφίζομαι,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 604.  
<sup>10</sup> As a loan word in Jewish lit. in the sense of a “voting stone,” hence “decision,” “destiny,” Pesikt., 17 (131a), cf. Krauss, 470.  
<sup>11</sup> Georg Braumann, “Ψῆφος, Ψηφίζω, Συψηφίζω (καταψηφίζομαι) Συγκραψηφίζομαι,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 604.  
<sup>12</sup> H.G. Liddell, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), 901.  
<sup>13</sup> Andrew Curtis and Isaiah Hoogendyk, *The Lexham Latin-English Interlinear Vulgate* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Re 2:17.