

The Church of the Servant King

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Prophecy Series

(Proph21C_Revelation_chps2&3 – Part 3)

The Seven Churches Continued (Rev 2:1-3:22)

We have been examining chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation in a manner that is consistent with the **historical** view or interpretation of this passage. In this lesson, we continue with our examination of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3.

PERGAMUM (Revelation 2:12-17)

12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: **The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:** **13** ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. **14** ‘But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit *acts of immorality*. **15** ‘Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. **16** ‘Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. **17** ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give *some* of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.’¹ (Rev 2:12-17)

Historical Facts

Pergamum was located about 55 miles north of Smyrna and about 20 miles from the Aegean Sea.² The hill on which the city was built rose one thousand feet above a plain containing the river Caicus. Its lower slopes were uniformly steep on all sides.³ The name of the city meant “parchment” and was where parchment was first manufactured to support the development of a library that contained approximately 200,000 volumes and “... whose collection rivaled that of the renowned library of Alexandria.”⁴ Tradition records that in Pergamum, King Eumenes II (197-159 B.C.) planned to build a library to rival the one in Alexandria. Ptolemy Epiphanes of Egypt (205-182 B.C.) tried to stop this effort by cutting off the export of papyrus sections. It was this embargo that forced Eumenes to develop vellum or parchment (*pergamene*, “from Pergamum”), a writing material made from animal skins.

By the time that John wrote, Pergamum had been the seat of a number of rulers. Its leadership in Asia began in about 282 BC when Philetæus (the son of Attalus) refused to remain

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from *The New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation, 1977).

² Robert L. Thomas, “The Chronological Interpretation of Revelation 2 – 3,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:496 (October, 1967), 177.

³ Colin J. Hemer,, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire, Great Britain: JSOT Press, 1986), 78.

⁴ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 177 & 180.

in subjection to King Lysimachus and founded the kingdom of Pergamum.⁵ The Attalids, the descendants of Attalus, the father of Philetaerus who came to power in 282 BC, were among the most loyal supporters of Rome among the Hellenistic successor states. Under Attalus I, they allied with Rome against Philip V of Macedon, during the first and second Macedonian Wars, and again under Eumenes II, against Perseus of Macedon, during the Third Macedonian War. For support against the Seleucids, the Attalids were rewarded with all the former Seleucid domains in Asia Minor.

During the following years, the city had a succession of kings named either Eumenes or Attalus and the kingdom varied in size from just a part of the Caicus Valley to as large as an area that embraced the later provincial areas of Mysia, Lydia, Caria, Phrygia, and Pamphylia. Kings of Pergamum controlled until 222 BC when the city came under the control of Antiochus the Great, the sixth ruler of the Seleucid empire, only to be ousted by the Romans in 190 BC.⁶

Pergamum for a while paid the Gauls tribute in the third century BC, but she retained her general independence. Attalus I, king of Pergamum, defeated the Gauls in two decisive victories and refused her tribute. She remained free for almost a century after that and was perhaps the most highly civilized state in the world. Pergamum shone with the great altar and costly buildings raised by the Attalid kings out of a treasury fattened by the labor of slaves in state forests, fields, mines, and factories. Under the auspices of the Pergamum princes, Greek art flourished. Pergamum remained the capital until the last of the Pergamenian kings, Attalus III, acquiescing to his sense of unavoidable destiny, made the Roman Republic the heir to his kingdom in 133 BC. Pergamum then became the Roman province of Asia. In 133 BC, Atalus III turned the city over to Rome.⁷ Pergamum thus became the official capital of the province for two and a half centuries.⁸

The fact that Pergamum was a seat of various governments for so many years most likely contributed to its material wealth and prosperity for it was never primarily a city of commerce due to its position in relation to the great trade routes.⁹ In addition, there was less Jewish presence in Pergamum than in other cities.¹⁰ The city evidently used much of its wealth to build temples devoted to the worship of idols because statues, altars, and sacred groves filled the city.¹¹ The primary deities to whom temples had been erected included:

- Zeus – the savior-god symbolized by a serpent
- Athena – the victory bearing goddess
- Dionysos (Bull) – the god of the royal family
- Asklepios – the god of healing associated with snakes and in whose shrine the sick were allowed to congregate to feed nonpoisonous snakes or spend the night in the hopes that a snake would touch them and they would be healed.¹²

Pergamum was the first city in Asia to have a temple devoted to the worship of the Roman emperor and goddess, Roma.¹³ The temple was erected in 29 BC to honor Augustus and

⁵ Ibid., 178.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 179.

⁸ Ibid., 179.

⁹ Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, 89.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 179.

¹² Ibid.

a second temple for emperor worship was added during the reign of Trajan and a third in the name of Severus.¹⁴ The city thus became a leader in this form of emperor cult worship. It was the worship of Asklepios and the worship of the emperor that was most repulsive to Christians for Satan is depicted as a serpent and only Christ was to be worshipped as God.¹⁵

New Testament Background Involving Pergamum

Pergamum is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament and we do not know anything of it in Christian times except what is mentioned in Revelation 2:12-17.

The Relationship Between the Historical and New Testament Background and Revelation 2:12-17

Christ describes Himself as possessing a sharp two edged sword. This description would have denoted several things to the readers:

- Christ was more powerful than Rome¹⁶
- Christ is the ultimate victor of all nations¹⁷
- Christ's judgment is dual in nature consisting of censure for the believer who compromises truth (Heb. 4:12) and more serious treatment for the unbeliever and unrepentant believer (Isa. 11:4)¹⁸
- The sword would have denoted the sentence of the judge and is associated with the word of God (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 19:13, 15)¹⁹

There is no doubt that any or all of these ideas could have been present in the minds of the readers. Christ's description of Himself is all the more poignant in light of the fact that "... in every other case Christ knows the 'works' of the church, here primarily their situation."²⁰

Most likely Christ refers to Pergamum as the location of Satan's throne due to the fact that emperor worship was so prominent there. Not only did the city contain two or possibly three temples devoted to such practices, but the imperial cult had its headquarters here and a special priesthood was devoted to this kind of worship.²¹ Probably Antipas (Rev. 2:13) is mentioned because he was a Christian victim of this religion, which by virtue of its connection with Rome, possessed the power of capital punishment.²² Tradition suggests that Antipas was burned to

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ E. M. Blaiklock, *The Seven Churches, an Exposition of Revelation, Chapters Two and Three* (Wheaton, Illinois: Van Kampen Press), 33.

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶ Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views, A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 69.

¹⁷ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 181.

¹⁸ Andrew Tait, *The Messages to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor: An Exposition of the First Three Chapters of the Book of the Revelation* (London, England: Hodder and Stoughton, 1884), 227.

¹⁹ Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, 85.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 184.

²² Ibid.

death in a bronze bull during the reign of Domitian, so he must have rejected the compromise of the Nicolaitans.²³

Christ uses the negative example of the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans to illustrate those areas in which the church at Pergamum was failing. Balaam had advised Balak, king of Moab that Israel would forfeit God's protection if he could induce them to worship idols in Numbers 31:16. Two other New Testament passages refer to the negative example of Balaam, i.e. 2 Peter 2:15 and Jude 11.

The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, 10 and especially those who indulge the flesh in *its* corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, 11 whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord. 12 But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, 13 suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, 14 having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; 15 forsaking the right way they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the *son* of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness, 16 but he received a rebuke for his own transgression; *for* a dumb donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet. (2 Pe 2:9-16)

11 Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. (Jude 11)

Evidently, the "Balaamites" at Pergamum taught others to relax their principles the way Balaam did, therefore to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication in a manner that resulted in a "religious syncretism."²⁴ In contrast to Paul's teaching in regard to eating meat which had been offered to idols and which was later purchased in the open market place, in Pergamum the issue was one of personal involvement in idolatrous feasts and the practice of fornication that was so closely related to these feasts.²⁵

The Nicolaitans proffered similar teachings in disobedience of the decision of the Jerusalem council regarding idolatrous practices and fornication in Acts 15:20 & 29. Whereas the teaching of Balaam may have involved more of a direct encouragement to believers to involve themselves in pagan activities, the teaching of the Nicolaitans constituted more than likely a perversion of the liberty that Paul advocated.²⁶ The early Church fathers (Tertullian, Hippolytus, Dorotheus of Tyre, Jerome, Augustine, Eusebius, and others) believed that the Nicolaitans were composed of followers of Nicolaus of Antioch who was one of the seven men selected to serve

²³ Blaiklock, *The Seven Churches, An Exposition*, 35.

²⁴ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 190.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

the church in Acts 6:5, but who later became a heretical teacher.²⁷ There is a widely held belief that has survived throughout the centuries that the religion of the Nicolaitans involved licentious practices and a possible relationship to the Gnosticism of the heretic Cerinthus because of the comparison in Revelation 2:15 to the teaching of Balaam.²⁸ As such, the Nicolaitans possibly represented a syncretistic compromise between the world (commercial activities), the flesh (sexual perversion), Satan (religion) and the spiritual life God desires of His own.

The church at Pergamum had begun to compromise and had not purged themselves of such promoters of evil as had the church at Ephesus. If they did not judge among themselves and remove such evil, Christ Himself would conduct the purging which would include the unrepentant and compromising believers in the church (Rev. 2:16). Most likely this referred to "... a special coming in the form of some pestilence or physical calamity..." that could have taken place a short time later.²⁹

Most likely, the reference by Christ to the "hidden manna" and the "white stone" in Revelation 2:17 derives its significance from the fact that white stones containing one's name were "tickets" for free doles of bread and free admission to entertainment that the people of the Roman empire received from time to time.³⁰ Another view with some support in the New Testament is that the stones represented affirmative votes for acquittal.³¹

To those at Pergamum who refused the banquets of the pagan gods, Christ will give the manna of his great banquet of eternal life in the kingdom ([John 6:47-58](#)).³²

The "white stone" is a puzzle. It has been thought of in relation to voting pebbles, an inscribed invitation to a banquet, a victory symbol, an amulet, or a counting pebble. It seems best to link the stone to the thought of the manna and see it as an allusion to an invitation that entitled its bearer to attend one of the pagan banquets.³³

The "new name ... known only to him who receives it" is either the name of Christ himself, now hidden from the world but to be revealed in the future as the most powerful of names ([3:12](#); [14:1](#)), or the believer's new name or changed character through redemption ([Isa 62:2](#); [65:15](#)). Pritchard cites an Egyptian text concerning the goddess Isis plotting to learn the secret name of the supreme god Re to gain his hidden power for herself. The one who knew the hidden name received the power and status of the god who revealed it (ANET, p. 12). Hence the name was jealously guarded by the god. This background would fit the context here in Revelation--viz., to Christians tempted to compromise their loyalty to Christ to

²⁷ Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views, A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 64.

²⁸ Robert L. Thomas, "The Chronological Interpretation of Revelation 2 – 3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:496 (October, 1967), 148-149 and Gregg, *Four Views*, 64-65.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Frank E. Gaebelin, gen editor, *Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989-1998), electronic edition.

³³ *Ibid.*

gain the favor of the pagan gods, Christ generously offers himself and the power of his name so that those who have faith in him may overcome.³⁴

³⁴ Ibid.