

The Letter to the Church at Pergamos – Revelation Ch. 2 vs. 12 – 17

Bible Study Notes on the Letter to the Church at Pergamos

Pergamos (KJV & NKJV) – sometimes written as Pergamum (NIV, GNB, NEB etc) or even occasionally as Pergamon or Pergamo

Pergamos is the feminine form of the Greek word whilst Pergamum is the neuter form of the name

Pergamos – History

Prior to Alexander the Great, Pergamos was little more than a castle on top of a hill. Its foundation is ascribed to Arcadian colonists under Heracleid Telephus, who routed the Achaeans (Greeks) on their landing in Mysia to attack Troy.

Its name is said to derive from the son of Pyrrhus (or Neoptolemus) and Andromache, Pergamus, who made himself ruler of Teuthrania by killing the king in single combat.

The impregnable position of Pergamos lent itself to its use as a treasury.

After Alexander, NW Asia was united to the Thracian kingdom of Lysimachus, however Philetaerus betrayed Lysimachus' trust by allying himself with Seleucus, Lysimachus' rival.

Its subsequent rulers skilfully established themselves as a dominant power in Asia Minor and one of the principal centres of Hellenistic culture. Wisely allying with Rome, it became an extremely wealthy and prosperous city, and for two centuries it became the official capital of the Roman province of Asia. Lacking proximity to the key trade routes, it eventually yields economic advantages to its better located rival, Ephesus.

Ephesus was the great political centre – Smyrna was the great commercial centre
Pergamos was the great religious centre

Pergamos - Geography

Pergamos is 18 miles from the sea and 48 miles north of Smyrna
It is the modern day city of Bergama – population 42,000 (cf. 200,000 of old)
Zeus is said to have been born there – to celebrate this a great altar stood there, built in the 2nd century BC, about 800ft above the modern city (on the valley floor) on a foundation 125 ft by 115 ft, over 50 ft. high, set in a colonnaded enclosure (Satan's throne? Revelation 2: 13).

Pergamos - Aesculapius

Aesculapius was one of the venerated idols in Pergamos – he had been recognized as a god, the god of the medical art (the son of Apollo and the virgin Cornois). He was termed "Saviour" and it was claimed that he had the power to avert death.

He was originally represented by the Anatolians as a serpent, and the Greeks later depicted him holding Hermes' staff



(the Caduceus) with the two-headed snake.

[The original idea emerging from the brazen serpent
of *Numbers 21: 8, 9; John 3: 14*]

Hermes is the god of commerce

The Caduceus was the official emblem of the city

A snake is a symbol of sin - Brass is a symbol of judgement

Many health related institutions today use the symbols of Aesculapius' staff (healing god) or the symbol of the caduceus (commerce god)



Aesculapium were health institutions before the scientific medical practice begun by Hippocrates, they prospered for eight centuries:

- They functioned mostly by psychiatry and suggestion:
 - Sleep was induced by priests using drugs and other methods to cause patients to dream and then interpret, etc
 - Bathing, whispered consultations, music, plays and other techniques were employed as therapeutic aids

Pergamos had an Aesculapium, the Sanctuary of Asclepius. Here people with health problems could bathe in the water of the sacred spring, and in the patients' dreams Aesculapius would appear in a vision to tell them how to cure their illness.

Archaeology has found lots of gifts and dedications that people would make afterwards, such as small terracotta body parts, no doubt representing what had been healed.

Notable extant structures in the Aesculapium include: the Roman theatre, the North and South Stoa, the Temple of Aesculapius, a circular treatment centre (sometimes known as the Temple of Telesphorus), a healing spring, an underground passageway, a library and the Via Tecta (or the Sacred Way) which is a colonnaded street leading to the sanctuary).

Pergamos – Caesar Worship

Although not the seat of imperial and judicial authority, Pergamos became the centre of the official religion of emperor "Caesar" worship. Augustus inaugurated emperor

worship in order to give the empire a bond of sentiment and the first temple of this cult was erected at Pergamos in 27 B.C. Under Vespasian and his successors, it became a test of one's faith if one would or would not offer incense to the statue of the emperor.

See Supplementary Note 14 'History of Rome'

Aesculapius was identical to Phaethon - or Nimrod - who founded the original Babylonian religion - eventually developing into the worship of his widow Semiramis and his posthumous son (the Ashtoreth and Tammuz of Phoenicia, the Isis and Horus of Egypt, the Aphrodite and Eros of Greece, and the Venus and Cupid of Rome, etc.)

See Supplementary Note 15 'Pergamos Maps'

The Letter to Pergamos – Revelation 2: 12-17

V 12 The Address and Sender

To Whom is the Letter Addressed?

'To the Angel of the Church of Pergamos' - clearly the ultimate recipient is the Pergamos church itself. However it will be read by all the seven churches – and by churches down the ages.

The Name of the Church – Pergamos is the city of the serpent
Pergamos in the Greek is an amalgamation of two words:

- *per* meaning mixed or objectionable
- *gamos* meaning marriage

Hence Pergamos means mixed (or objectionable) marriage – the letter thus implies an inappropriate marriage or a perverted marriage

Who is the Letter From?

It is from 'He who has the sharp two-edged'.
It is from Jesus Christ, from Yeshua.

Title of Christ – 'He who has the sharp two-edged sword'

Title from Chapter 1 which emphasises Jesus as the Word of God (sharp two-edged sword)

*'He had in His right hand seven stars, **out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword**, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.'*

Revelation 1: 16

Why does Yeshua choose the Title 'He who has the sharp two-edged sword'

The errors in the church require correction which comes from obedience to the word which proceeds from the mouth of the Lord
The correction for error is truth - the word of God will be the primary remedy to the problems of the church in Pergamos

V 13 Commendations from Yeshua

How does Yeshua Begin His Commendations?

He says 'I know your works' – as He did to Ephesus (v.2) and to Smyrna (v.9)
Yeshua knows what is (really) going on in the church – he is fully aware

This applies personally too!

He also says 'I know...where you dwell, where Satan's throne is' – literal!

On the acropolis in Pergamos was a huge, throne-shaped altar to Zeus.

'Where Satan dwells' – again literal!

The church at Pergamos was in the centre of pagan worship – Aesculapius and Caesar

Satan is Real:

- Character
 - Murderer *John 8: 44*
 - Deceiver *Revelation 12: 9; 2 Corinthians 11: 3*
 - Liar *John 8: 44*
 - Sinner *1 John 3: 8*
- Domain
 - Vast demonic kingdom *Revelation 12: 7; Ephesians 6: 12*
 - World System *1 John 5: 19*
- Satan's Titles
 - Adversary (meaning of his name) *1 Timothy 5: 14; 1 Peter 5: 8*
 - Accuser of the brethren *Revelation 12: 10*
 - God of this world *2 Corinthians 4: 4*
 - Prince of the power of the air *Ephesians 2: 2*
 - The spirit that works in the children of disobedience *Ephesians 2: 2*
 - The enemy that sowed tares *Matthew 13: 39*
 - The wicked one 6 times
- Spiritual Geography - Locality of Satan and his Demons
 - Subject to restrictions *Book of Job*
 - Like Embodiment *Matthew. 8: 28-34*
 - Territorial *Daniel 10; Revelation. 9: 14, 16: 12*
 - Not omnipresent

The Migration of Idolatry and False Worship

- From Babylon (Nimrod/Babel) to Pergamos (Greek), and then to Rome

How many things are commended?

Two things are mentioned:

Commended for holding fast to His name

His name – always referred to in the singular (though He has many names)

Refers to His character, His authority, His person, His reality

To which of the 10 Commandments does this relate?

The 3rd commandment – which is not talking about vocabulary, but is really about loyal ambassadorship (faithfully representing His name...holding fast His name)

Commended for not denying 'My faith' even in the days of martyrdom

What should we understand by 'My faith'?

The great doctrines of the gospel – of who Yeshua is and of the need for and efficacy of His atoning death

It is a further endorsement of their loyal ambassadorship – in the face of persecution

Antipas – possibly a pastor at Pergamos – there is no mention of him elsewhere: some scholars think he is one who was martyred in a brazen bowl or brass cow; others point to the meaning of the name ‘against all’ – indicating his stand for the faith

Martyr (Greek: *martus*) means ‘witness’ and is most often translated so (e.g. *Acts 1: 8*)

VS 14 & 15 Concerns (criticisms) of Yeshua

How many things are of concern to Yeshua?

Two things are mentioned:

The Doctrine of Balaam

‘You have those who hold to the doctrine of Balaam’ – led astray - eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality

Yeshua uses a reference from the OT to make a point:

What do we know about Balaam?

The Prophet Balaam

- A Gentile, not Jewish
 - “Soothsayer” *Joshua 13: 22*
 - For Hire *Numbers 22: 5-6*
 - From Mesopotamia *Deuteronomy 23: 4-5*
 - By Euphrates, Aram *Numbers 22: 5; 23: 7*
- Hired by Balak, King of Moab
 - Told not to go by God *Numbers 22: 10*
 - God then permits him to go *Numbers 22: 20*
 - nb. : difference between what God allows and what He prefers
 - Rebuked by his donkey *Numbers 22: 28-33*
 - Refused to curse Israel *Numbers 23, 24*
 - Taught Balak how to defeat Israel *Numbers 25: 1-3, 31: 16*
 - Led Israel into sexual immorality and idol worship
- “Doctrine of Balaam”
 - Spiritual unchastity; marriage with the world *Revelation 2: 14*
- “Way of Balaam”
 - Hireling = making a ‘market’ for his gift *2 Peter 2: 15*
- “Error of Balaam”
 - Sacrificing eternal riches for temporal gain *Jude 11*

What does this imply was wrong with the church at Pergamos?

- Perverted Marriage – adopting ways and practices of those among whom they live
 - Possibly adopting satanic healing practices / Aesculapian practices
 - Possibly adopting aspects of Caesar worship

The Doctrine of the Nicolaitans

‘You also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans’ – which the Lord hates

Nicolaitans:

Some scholars say this was a 1st century sect claiming apostolic authority for their opinions (Nicolas was appointed a deacon in Acts 6)

Other scholars say it is an un-translated word:

- *Nicao* meaning conquer, overcome, rule
- *Laos* meaning laity, people
- Hence the deeds hated are the clergy ruling over the laity, creating hierarchies (the opposite of Laodicea)

What were the Nicolaitan’s ‘deeds’ in Ephesus are ‘doctrines’ in Pergamos – but whereas the Ephesians hated the deeds, those at Pergamos held to their doctrine

What is godly order within the church?

Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and Teachers

‘And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,’

Ephesians 4: 11-12

Apostles, Prophets and Evangelists – tend to be individuals and ‘on the outside’ of society and sometimes the church fellowships

Pastors and Teachers – based in a church fellowship

Elders

‘To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.’

1-4

1 Peter 5:

Elders are ‘older and wiser’ members of the body whose role is to be a shepherd

V 16 Exhortations from Yeshua

What Exhortation does Yeshua give this Church?

Repent – Greek: *metanoēō*, meaning to think (and therefore act) differently

Turn around

Renounce the false doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans

Or Else – stern words from Jesus

He will come quickly (the urgency of the call to repent)

‘To You’ – implying to the church as a whole

He will fight against the church with the sword of His mouth (the Word of God)

‘Against Them’ – implying those who hold, teach or practice false doctrine

The church’s Saviour will become their enemy if they do not repent

V 17 **The Common Phrase and the Promise to the Overcomer**

The Common Phrase is not the final line of the letter – as with the first three letters it is in the body of the letter

The promise to the overcomer is an appendage, a postscript, to the letter after the common closing phrase (as with Ephesus and Smyrna)

What are Promised to the Overcomer and what do they Mean?

The promise is to receive ‘some of the hidden manna to eat’ and also to be given ‘a white stone’ with ‘a new name written’ on it

Hidden Manna

- Manna means “What is it” *Exodus 16: 15*
- Collected daily for 6 days only *Exodus 16: 16-26*
 - nb: Sabbath instituted here, before Sinai
 - Manna was Israel’s food for 40 years
- Described poetically
 - “food from heaven” & “angel’s food” *Psalm 78: 24-25*
 - “bread of heaven” *Psalm 105: 40*
- Jesus said “I Am the Bread of Life” *John 6: 26-58*

“For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

John 6: 33

- Manna is prophetic of Yeshua
- The promise of the ‘hidden manna’ is Jesus Himself
- Implicit in this is the promise of everlasting life (*John 6: 40*)

White Stone & New Name

A White Stone - Scholars have many conjectures as to the meaning of this

- Chuck Missler suggests it is an allusion to the Roman practice of giving a white stone with one’s name written on it – which gave access to the games and to food thereat
 - Hence this is an idiom for right of access to the heavenly kingdom
- John MacArthur suggests something similar – when an athlete won in the games, he was often given, as part of his prize, a white stone which was an admission pass to the winners' celebration afterwards
 - This may picture the moment when the overcomer will receive his ticket to the eternal victory celebration in heaven
- Matthew Henry suggests this white stone is absolution from the guilt of sin, alluding to the ancient custom of giving a white stone to those acquitted on trial and a black stone to those condemned

A New Name

- This indicates something deeply personal between the Messiah and the disciple – the name known only to the disciple
- A name of adoption into God’s family – adopted persons take the name of the family into which they are adopted

Applications of this Letter

Local Application

What was the Application to Pergamos...and what has happened?

Avoid spiritual (and physical) immorality – pursue spiritual chastity

Turn from compromise with the world (Perverted marriage)

Today Pergamos is an ancient site by the city of Bergama, no church is known to be there

Admonitory Application (to all churches)

What is the Application to Churches Generally (including today)?

Purify your ambassadorship – hold fast to My Name

Stand Fast against the world and do not adopt its doctrines or practices

The church is betrothed to Christ and is not to have a perverted marriage with another

Personal Application

What is the Application of this letter Personally?

Beware of Spiritual Compromise (with the world) – do not get tangled up with the world, taking on the ways and idols of the world...as with Israel through Balaam's advice to Balak

You cannot serve two masters

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Matthew 6: 24

Prophetic Application

Pergamos appears to be a profile of the Married Church of the 4th century, the church that became married to the world

Migrating Priesthood

- When Cyrus conquered Babylon, the Babylonian priesthood and their initiates fled and founded a new centre at Pergamos
- As the centre of power ultimately shifted to Rome, this same religious system adopted Latin labels and formed the foundation for pagan Rome

Marriage Consummated (between the world and the church)

- Constantine was Roman Emperor from 306AD to 337AD
- 325AD Constantine issues Edict of Toleration establishing freedom of religion
 - Favoured Christians at court
 - Exempted Christian ministers from taxes
 - Issued a general exhortation to all his subjects to become Christians

- 361-363AD Julian, 'The Apostate' - sought to restore paganism
- 363-364AD Jovian – re-established the Christian religion
- 378-395AD Theodosius
 - Made Christianity the state religion
 - Forced conversions filled the churches with un-regenerates
 - Ambition to rule, heathenism and pomp emerge in the world church

Perverted Marriage

- Heathenism was Christianized
 - Pagan temples became Christian Churches
 - Heathen festivals were converted into Christian ones
 - Saturnalia becomes Christmas, etc
- Pagan priests slipped into office as Christian priests
- The change was mostly nomenclature – giving 'Christian' names to previous pagan practices
- What persecution didn't accomplish, marriage to the world did!
- Compromise of loyal ambassadorship

Matthew 13

There are seven 'Parables of the Kingdom' in *Matthew chapter 13*

The Pergamos Church is reflected – in the parable of the Mustard Seed because the Married Church, the state church married to the world, in which the birds come and lodge

Paul's Epistles

The epistles that relate most directly to the church at Pergamos are the letters to the Corinthians, both probably written from Ephesus. They are letters to a church which had become worldly, riven with divisions and immorality and unbecoming worship. In them Paul gives warnings to flee from idolatry and not to be yoked with unbelievers – a message that would be appropriate to a church married to the world.

Yeshua's 2nd Coming

There is no explicit reference to it in this letter

Pergamos Pictures



Drawing of Ancient Pergamum



The Asklepieion with the Acropolis on the hilltop



The Acropolis



Site of the Altar of Zeus



Replica of the Altar of Zeus in the Pergamos Museum, Berlin



The Amphitheatre