

Letter to Pergamum

1. Pergamum vied with Smyrna and Ephesus for preeminence in the region. Some suggest it was the official Roman seat of power and was the first in to erect a temple to Caesar (Smyrna was first to erect one to Rome). It had an imposing hill covered with temples, one of which to Zeus “savior” that had a famous throne/altar and another to Asclepius who had a serpent symbol. Pergamum was a vital center for emperor worship.
2. Again we see the letter’s address referring to a specific element of the vision of the Son of Man. The sword will be prominent in this letter.
3. There is a lot of speculation as to what specifically the reference to “Satan’s throne” is referring. It could be to Zeus’ throne/altar, to the Asclepius cult, or to the city being the Roman capital in the area. The imagine need not be exclusive to one or another. It’s also clear that the church had already suffered persecution that had led to the death of at least one Christian.
4. In the letter to Smyrna we saw the situation of that church in the light of the story of Daniel. For Pergamum the narrative of Balaam comes to the fore. The king of Moab hired Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam is confronted with an angel with a sword that only his ass could see. Balaam was unable to curse Israel, but eventually hatched a plot to trip Israel up, to seduce them into assimilating with Moab via intermarriage and religious worship. See how this unfolds in Numbers 25. Ever since then Balaam and this incident were symbolic for assimilation.
5. For gentile converts separation from participation in temple feasts would have been an entirely new idea. Paganism tended to be a “the more the better” type proposition with adding sacrifices to different gods for additional advantages or social mobility. Separating oneself from all of this would also have a clear financial disadvantage. Apparently there were teachers in the church that taught that A Christian in his freedom could participate in this. John’s message is clearly in contrast to this.
6. Why was it important that Israel be distinct? We usually see this conflict in terms of some religious sense of party loyalty or partisanship: “You should be faithful to YOUR god and not be unfaithful.” This makes the whole business about trying to back the right horse and then just doing the things that comply with the head office’s directives. The gospel is a different sort of thing entirely. The isn’t simply a failure of allegiance, it is the nature of the relationship entirely. In this way we can begin to see the collusion of the problem with what looks like opposites: Judaism’s legalism vs. Paganism’s antinomian tendencies.
 - a. What is the motivational structure of the heart in both Judaism and paganism?
 - b. How does syncretism function in a similar way?
 - c. How is gospel different?
 - d. How can the gospel still be perfect freedom and not fall into these things?
7. Notice carefully verse 16. What do you make of this?

8. Notice what Ignatius says to Polycarp:

Do not let those who appear to be trustworthy yet who teach strange doctrines baffle you. Stand firm, like an anvil being struck with a hammer. It is the mark of a great athlete to be bruised, yet still conquer. But especially we must, for God's sake, patiently put up with all things, that he may also put up with us. ¹

9. Hidden manna. Remember the Old Testament context is the Balaam story and the seduction of Israel to the women and food of Moab. Here there is a contrast. Manna is also a connection to the banquet of the lamb.

10. White Stone:

- a. White stones were often used to represent an acquittal in a court of law, black stones for condemnation
- b. An old Jewish tradition held that precious stones fell with the manna

11. A new name

- a. All of the images: manna, stone, and a new name all come out for heaven down to earth, like the New Jerusalem at the end of the book. The message is clear. This is all coming from God to you
- b. Israel is given "a new name" in Isaiah 62:2, 65:15.
- c. This "hidden" and "no one knows except the one who receives it" all communicates intimacy.
- d. This also connects with citizenship in the New Jerusalem

12. How does this all hang together? Why is this striving through either legalism or paganism mute in Jesus Christ? Who would exchange an illusion of control bought at the price of bondage and worry for the riches and promises given freely?

¹Holmes, M. W. (1999). *The Apostolic Fathers : Greek texts and English translations* (Updated ed.) (197). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.