HISTORY
OF THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

This is described as the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (2:14-15). Revelation’s use of the Balaam typology underscores the book’s reliance on Old Testament symbols. Balaam’s story is found in Numbers 22-24. He was a prophet who manipulated Israel into falling under God’s curse. Balaam’s motive was personal gain (2 Peter 2:15; Jude 6). He had been offered riches and power by Balak, a gentle king, to destroy God’s people, Israel.

The prophet found a way to accomplish the king’s nefarious desire. Balaam devised a plan whereby he caused the men of Israel to commit sexual immorality with Moabite women and to sacrifice to their gods in a community meal during a festival (Numbers 25:1-2). Thus he led Israel into sin by causing the nation to accommodate itself to idolatrous pagan religion and its immortality. Balaam came to stand for an evil individual who seduces God’s people into sin.

But in what sense were members of the church committing sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols (2:14)? It is generally thought that this phrase refers to food eaten at festivals in which pagan gods were honored, as well as the sexual activities that may have gone on as part of such feasts. Both expression

Both a literal and figurative meaning may be in view here in Revelation. Since sexual immorality was sometimes associated with worship in pagan religion, the Christian would be taking both sexual license as well as committing religious infidelity if he participated in the religious practices of the city. This could also be understood metaphorically. That is, they would refer to general religious infidelity engaged in by Christians who participated in pagan rites and festivities.

The Balaamites may have been teaching the converts that participating in temple feasts or other activities in which the gods were invoked was not wrong because it served a good end. The unknown prophets or self-appointed teachers, metaphorically called “Balaam,” were probably counseling accommodation with the pagan culture. Balaam and the Nicolaitans as well as another heretical group we encounter later – the followers of a prophetess named “Jezebel” – probably all taught generally the same thing. G.R. Beasley-Murray, in speaking of the Nicolaitans, wrote:

“They will have maintained that idols are nothing...Therefore Christians need not hesitate to take part in pagan feasts, whether among trade guilds or in temples.... Nor need they be over-scrupulous about acknowledging the divinity of Caesar, for they can do it in the same spirit as many pagans did – as a gesture of loyalty to Rome, without religious significance.” (The New Century Bible Commentary, “Revelation,” p. 86)

Of course, Revelation does not reveal the specific identity of the Nicolaitans nor does it rigorously define their beliefs. Irenaeus and other early church fathers claimed that the Nicolaitans practiced unrestrained indulgence (Against Heresies, 1.26.3). If they have not falsely defined their enemies – the Nicolaitans would have taught a life of loose morals, but no doubt under the guise of a deceptive theological rationale.

Following the teaching of the Balaamites and Nicolaitans, some church members in Pergamum had violated the freedom and grace they enjoyed in Christ. They had lapsed into a sinful accommodation with idolatry and immorality. The seriousness of the poor spiritual condition of some at Pergamum was underscored by Christ’s warning. He would fight against the heretics with the sword of his mouth (2:16).

The mistakes of the Pergamum church are important lessons to all Christians who must struggle to keep their spiritual balance in a darkened world.

- Holman Christian Study Bible
REVELATION 2:12-17

12 “Write to the angel of the church in Pergamum:

“The One who has the sharp, double-edged sword says: 13 I know where you live—where Satan’s throne is! And you are holding on to My name and did not deny your faith in Me, even in the days of Antipas, My faithful witness who was killed among you, where Satan lives. 14 But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the Israelites: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. 15 In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Therefore repent! Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of My mouth.

17 “Anyone who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. I will give the victor some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name is inscribed that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Keyword

“Balaam” / Greek: “Balaam”

Phonetic Pronunciation: bal-ah-am’

Definition: A native of Pethor a city in Mesopotamia, endued by Jehovah with prophetic power. He was hired by Balak to curse the Israelites; and influenced by the love of reward, he wished to gratify Balak; but he was compelled by Jehovah’s power to bless them. Hence later the Jews saw him as a most abandoned deceiver.

Questions to consider

1. What was the church at Pergamum doing well?
2. Why must they repent?
3. From Chapter 2, what do you know about the Nicolaitans?
4. Define sexual immorality.
5. Take a minute to examine your life and ask yourself, “Am I living a sexual pure life?” What do you need to do in order to live a sexually pure life?

Additional passages

Revelation 2:6, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8
Observations / WHAT DOES GOD WANT ME TO KNOW?

Commands / WHAT DOES GOD WANT ME TO DO?

Promises / WHY DOES GOD WANT ME TO DO THESE THINGS?

Principles / examples

Practical application

Sermon notes / journal