

Smyrna

The ancient city of Smyrna is located almost 35 miles due north of Ephesus within the modern Turkish city of Izmir. The ancient city of Smyrna was founded by the Ionians more than 1000 years before Christ. Smyrna was attacked by the Babylonians in 600 BC. It was utterly destroyed and ceased to exist until the 3rd Century BC when it was rebuilt after Alexander the Great conquered Asia Minor. The new Hellenized city reflected nothing of the Asian culture native to the area.

Close association with Rome began early in Smyrna's history. Originally Smyrna was in need of an ally in Rome against the Seleucids who controlled much of Asia Minor. Rome allied itself with Smyrna to have a "friend" in a region they desired to control. At the end of the second century BC, Smyrna built a temple and established the cult worship of Roma – the Spirit of Rome, further entrenching itself with Rome. The city of Smyrna took great pride in its faithful alliance with Rome. Cicero described Rome's feeling toward Smyrna as "the city of our most faithful and most ancient allies". In 26 AD the Smyrneans argued before the Roman senate that the new temple to the Emperor Tiberius being built in Asia should reside in Smyrna because of their long history as friend and ally to Rome dating back to a time before Rome's becoming the greatest power in the world.

The Smyrneans were especially proud of the beauty of their city, known as "the ornament of Asia". Strabo describes the city as having wide, well paved streets, arranged in orderly rectangular blocks backed by the hills to the south and west, rich farmland to the east, and the sea to the north. The buildings appear to rise out of the sea winding up the hill to eventually come to the foot of the *Pagos*, "The Hill", where the city is crowned by an acropolis of gleaming white temples and civic buildings. Smyrna enjoyed much peace and prosperity.

Interesting fact: Smyrna boasts Homer as a native son, frequenting coins and even gracing a temple – the Homereion.

Christianity spread in the city of Smyrna in the first century. Paul likely visited there during his third missionary journey evangelizing in the synagogues, as well as to Gentile God-fearers. There was heavy persecution of Christians in Smyrna. Gentiles were devoted to the worship of the Emperor, according to tradition and enforced by Roman law. There was a large population of Jews in Smyrna who were openly hostile to Christians. Jews enjoyed a dispensation from the Roman government exempting them from participation in the cult worship of the Emperor. When the Christians were cast out of the synagogue for embracing what the Jews believed to be heresy, they lost the protection of the synagogue and were subject to the Roman law forcing worship of Emperor Domitian. The Christians faced physical, emotional and economic persecution from both the Gentiles and the Jews

for their faith in Christ. They faced being maligned, ostracized, rejected, hated and abused in this thoroughly Roman city. The Smyrnan Christians were probably ostracized in business and trade, and possibly even subjected to extortion, robbery and physical abuse to the point of death. This left them impoverished and likely destitute.

Despite the persecution, the Christian church was vital and vigorous in the second century. Polycarp, an apostle of John was consecrated by Paul as Bishop of Smyrna where he had been a prominent leader in that church. In 155 AD he faced a martyr's death being burned at the stake in that city. Interestingly, the Jews of the city had an active role in his execution and the death of ten other Christians even though the execution took place on a Sabbath.¹

Pergamum

The church in Pergamum is the next letter Christ addresses in Revelation Chapter 2. Pergamum is 55 miles north-east of Smyrna and about 20 miles inland from the sea. It was built on a hill 1,000 feet above the surrounding country-side forming a natural fortress. The word Pergamum means "citadel"². The ancient city is found just above its modern counterpart, Bergama. Like Ephesus and Smyrna it too was a very wealthy cultural center in Asia Minor. While Ephesus was the center of commerce in Asia, Pergamum was the Eastern seat of power in the Roman Empire. One can make the comparison that Ephesus is to New York City as Pergamum is to Washington D.C. Pergamum was one of the preeminent cities in Asia. Pergamum had a library second only to the one in Alexandria and held some 200,000 scrolls. It was in this city that parchment first appeared. Pergamum also had an immense theatre and gymnasium, Roman palaces and temples graced its acropolis on the hill above the city.

Famous for its pagan temples, it was most known for the worship of four patron deities: Asclepius (god of healing), Athena, Dionysus, and Zeus. The Altar of Zeus is one of the foremost archaeological finds in the area. While called an altar, it is more of a monumental colonnaded court measuring 120 by 112 feet and standing 40 feet high. Adorned with a giant carved frieze it is considered one of the greatest Hellenist works of art. According to some scholars it is to this altar that Christ's comments of "Satan's throne" in Revelation 2:13 might allude. The Asklepion drew people from all over the empire seeking relief and healing from all sorts of illness and disease. It was also one of the most important teaching and training centers in the healing arts and early medicine. Temples to

¹ Yamauchi, Edwin M.; *New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor*; 1980.

² Hitchcock's Dictionary of Bible Names

Demeter and Persephone, and the Egyptian gods Serapis, Isis, and Harpocrates also graced the acropolis of Pergamum along with palaces and administrative buildings.

Pergamum was one of the first Asian cities to become a Roman ally. Attalus II, the ruler of Pergamum bequeathed the city to Rome in 133 BC. It became the first capitol of Rome in Asia Minor before the capitol shifted sometime later to Ephesus. An alternate view of "Satan's Throne" (Rev. 2:13) may refer to the seat of Roman authority in Pergamum. It is also believed that the death of Antipas, Christ's "faithful martyr" (Rev. 2:13) may have been either sanctioned or ordered by the Roman authorities. Christian lifestyle would have been thoroughly at odds with the lifestyle of Romans in Pergamum. The Imperial cult (or emperor worship) began in 29 BC with the establishment of the Temple to Roma and Caesar Augustus. Pergamum became a place of pilgrimage for many Romans throughout the empire.

Wealth and immorality were rampant in this thoroughly Roman city. A small outpost of Christianity shined in the darkness, and was all but overpowered by the depravity around it. As we will see the wickedness of the pagan culture even seeps into the lives of the Christians in this church.

The Teachings of Balaam



Numbers 22:1-12

For the sake of better understanding our Christ's indictment against some in the church of Pergamum, we will spend our time today learning about Balaam in the Old Testament Book of Numbers. The story of Balaam takes place after as the Israelites have crossed into the Promised Land and are at the point of driving out the local Canaanites and taking possession of their land as instructed by the Lord. In Exodus 23: 27 and 30 the Lord tells Moses, *"I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run...Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land."* The Israelites have already defeated the Amorites and enter the land of Moab. Verse 2 tells us that the Moabites were filled with dread at the sight of the Israelites and that Balak was terrified by what he had seen done to the Amorites at the hands of the Israelites. He feared that Israel would attack, slaughter, pillage, and take possession of the cities of the Moabites.

Actually the Moabites would have had nothing to fear from the Israelites, God had commanded them to leave the Moabites alone because they were kinsmen of the

Israelites³. We will come to see in this story that the Moabites, the Ammonites and the Midianites were all were under Yahweh's protection, until they incur his wrath. The Lord's original instruction to Moses was that Israel must take pains to avoid harmful contact with these groups. Moses also prophesies that the Lord will strike terror into the hearts of these groups because of the Israelites victories over other Canaanite groups⁴.

Balaam was a pagan⁵ sorcerer and prophet renowned for his ability to invoke a blessing or a curse upon peoples and nations, and in this case the Israelites being lead through Moab by Moses. The Canaanites believed that their prophets could influence or persuade the gods to do their bidding by magic, incantations and sacrifices. Canaanite gods had influence over specific regions or areas. The prophets could go from one mountain top, or high place, to another seeking a god that would help them.

If Balaam gave a blessing over Israel, Israel would be victorious against the Moabites. If Balaam gave a curse, then Israel would meet their destruction. In our story of Balaam, he has been summoned by the Moabite King, Balak, who would like to bring destruction upon the people of Israel in his land. When Balaam goes to consult the local Canaanite god, he comes in contact with the God of Israel and is told he must speak a blessing over the Israelites, much to Balak's frustration. At one point Balaam even attempts to disobey God and is prevented by a donkey and the Angel of the Lord— a story we will look at. Eventually, Balaam finds a way to bring down the Israelites despite knowing that they are a people blessed by God and connives to bring about God's wrath upon the Israelites. The story in its entirety is recorded in Numbers 22-33. We will only look at a few passages in order to come to an understanding of how Balaam plays into Christ's criticism of tolerating the teachings of Balaam in the Pergamum church.

First, we will take a look at Balaam's encounter with an Angel of the Lord. The Lord had told Balaam to go with Balak's messengers and do only as God has instructed him. As Balaam sets out, we see that perhaps his heart was headed in a direction divergent from God's instruction.



Read Numbers 22: 20-35

We see Balaam set out with Balak's messengers, and we are told that the Lord is angry with him for doing so, yet just prior to Balak's setting out, the Lord had given him permission (22:20). So why is the Lord angered by Balaam's going? Since he is following the Lord's instruction, it is not the "going" that is the issue. We will see as we continue, the

³ Genesis 19:26-37 tell us that the Moabites and the Ammonites are the descendants of Lot. Deut: 2:5-19,25:1-4 are Yahweh's command that Israel should not harm these peoples.

⁴ Exodus 15:15

⁵ Numbers 22:5 says Pethor, near the Euphrates River.

Lord objects to the “why” in his going. Balaam appears to be caught up in Balak’s promises of wealth and prestige. He is blinded by greed, unable to see the Angel before him.

According to the Bible Knowledge Commentary, this angel of the Lord is likely a theophany⁶, a vision of the pre-incarnate Christ. We see him here holding a sword, the same sword associated with Hebrews 4:12, *“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* This angel of the Lord knows the true motives of Balaam’s heart. I think it interesting that the NIV focuses on a reckless path that Balaam is pursuing. Defying the One True God is certainly reckless, but it is more than just reckless. The NKJV tells us Balaam’s *“way is perverse before Me”*; the NASB translates verse 31 as *“Behold, I [the angel of the Lord] have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me”* and the Holman Bible says, *“what you [Balaam] are doing is evil in My sight.”* Balaam gets the message: he dares not defy the Angel of the Lord. He dare not offer a curse instead of a blessing, but he does find a way to help Balak achieve his desire of bring destruction upon Israel.

Balak comes to meet Balaam at Arnon and they proceed to Bamoth Baal, “the high place of Baal”. A high place is a sacred place or mountain where Canaanites would worship, seek communication with and make sacrifices to their Canaanite gods. Verse 24:1 tells us that Balaam’s usual practice is sorcery, and according to the Amplified Bible that includes divination through omens and signs in the *natural* world. Clearly this Canaanite prophet is being used to the glory of God just as was Abimelech in Abraham’s time, Pharaoh, and Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel’s time. In fact, God spoke directly with each of these men through their dreams. God can use whomever he pleases whenever he pleases to work out his glory.

Balaam tells Balak to stay with him to await word from the god Baal. Balaam had already received word from the Lord, but here he is beseeching another god for the permission to pronounce a curse on Israel. The prophets of Canaan did not fathom that there was only one God of the world in its entirety. If they didn’t get the answer they wanted at first, then they move on to the next high place. But it is not Baal that speaks to Balaam, it’s the Lord who compels Balaam to pronounce a blessing over Israel before Balak (23:7-12). Balaam says *“how can I curse those whom the Lord has not cursed?”* His blessing is upon them, they are as numerous as dust on the ground. He seems to almost long to be counted among their number and wishes that his end may be like theirs. Balak is disappointed but not to be dissuaded.

⁶ This is clear from the fact that He frequently was equated with Deity and that He was offered and accepted worship, something absolutely forbidden to ordinary angels (see [comments](#) on [Gen. 16:7](#); and cf. [Gen. 18:1-2](#); [22:14-18](#); [Ex. 3:1-6](#); [Josh. 5:13-15](#); [Judges 6:20-22](#); [13:17-23](#); etc.). —Bible Knowledge Commentary

Next he takes Balaam to Mt. Pisgah where offerings are made again to the pagan god, but again it is the Lord who responds compelling Balaam to announce that the Lord will not repeal his blessing on Israel (23:18-26). The Lord states that he is immovable in what he proclaims, he neither lies nor changes his mind, he does not speak and then fail act upon his word. Next the Lord points out to Balaam, and thereby Balak, that Israel was not only brought out of Egypt by the Lord, but the Lord is present among them. No sorcery can undo what the Lord has proclaimed.

Still not deterred, Balak takes Balaam to another high place at Mt. Peor where offerings and sacrifices are made to the pagan gods and again the Lord compels Balaam to speak a blessing a third time over Israel before Balak and the Moabites, much to Balak's fury (24:3-10). In his final blessing Balaam says Israel is like a lion crouched and ready to attack. It would be folly for anyone to provoke them. He finishes his blessing with an additional blessing: "May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed!" echoing and reiterating the Lords promise to Abram in Genesis 12:3. "*Balak's anger burned against Balaam*" and the two separate and go their own ways.

We are not quite done with Balaam yet. We have come to see that Balaam, far from being a friend to the Israelites, is a self-serving pagan prophet being used by God Almighty in the protection of His chosen people, the Israelites. The next few passages will illustrate to us that even though Balaam was not able to curse Israel, he was able to find a means by which he will induce Israel into bringing the wrath of God upon themselves. The passage in Chapter 22 reveals that Balaam's heart is swayed and motivated by wealth and prestige, not faithful prophetic service. Balaam was forced to prophecy a blessing over Israel at the expense of a profitable relationship with the Midianite kings. Balaam finds another way to bring down Israel.



Numbers 25:1-9, tell us that while the Israelites were camped in Shittim they became involved in pagan cultic practices. The men engaged in sexual immorality with the Moabite women – this means they were involved with temple prostitutes, practices related to fertility rites and idol worship in the pagan temples. The carnal aspects of their activity led Israel into spiritual apostasy. They brazenly participated in acts evil in the eyes of the Lord. One man even dared bring his prostitute into the camp of Israel. The practice was so widespread that the anger of the Lord burned against Israel and death was brought upon those engaged in this immorality.

Certainly at first the men of Israel had no intention of becoming involved in idol worship. But they were tempted by the Moabite women. The availability and acceptability of this behavior among the Canaanites lured the Israelite men to relax their standards, to

ignore their code of ethics. What was not only permissible, but encouraged in the Canaanite culture became viewed as possible, permissible, acceptable among the Israelites. First what was done stealthily and clandestinely became habitually and then finally, openly paraded in the camp of Israel. Their sin started small and secret and bloomed into open rebellion against the Lord. What began here at Shittim became a constant temptation and a recurring infidelity on the part of Israel for the rest of its history in the Promise Land even up to the time of Jesus.



Numbers 31: 1-16

Our next passage will reveal Balaam's connection with the immorality of the Israelites. At this point the Lord gives Israel permission to kill the Midianites and Moabites for their treachery, despite his previous injunction. In Numbers 31:1 the Lord tells Moses to go to war against the Midianites. Israel succeeds in killing all the Midianite men including the five kings of Midian, and Balaam, son of Beor was among them. They take all the women, children, herds and possessions of the Midianites captive which angers Moses. He demands of his commanders, *"Have you allowed all these women to live?They are the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord..."* (v.16). Suddenly, we see the connection. What Balaam was unable to accomplish through invoking a curse upon Israel, he did through enticement and temptation.

In this study of Balaam and the Israelites we see Israel tempted into sin and idolatry because they did not guard and value the teachings of the Lord. They openly and disdainfully engaged in behavior they knew was abhorrent to the Lord and were judged accordingly for it and paid the ultimate sentence. They died without repenting likely because the Lord knew they were unrepentant and would lead others into this sin by their example. They were living a double life. They claimed to be Children of the Covenant, but lived like the pagans. They disdained the Word of the Lord and embraced pagan immorality and idol worship. Their actions unstemmed would lead others to believe their behavior not immoral, but permissible. Their immorality was a cancer requiring immediate and radical remedy before the rest of the body of Israel became infected. This was Balaam's legacy for Israel. Throughout its history, Israel would be unfaithful with the idols of Canaan, going back and forth between pagan gods and the God of Israel.