

Cultural/Historical Context

Pergamum was the capital city of the Kingdom of Pergamum and then the Roman province of Asia

Roman power was represented with the double-edged Roman sword.

Pergamum was the 1st city to build a worship site to Caesar Augustus in 26 BC.

Roman governor at Pergamum held the “right of the sword” – *ius gladdi* – the power of the death penalty or over “life and death.”

To understand the “teaching” of Balaam we must go outside the Bible to Jewish sources from the 1st century.

The historian Josephus recounts the *midrash* of what Balaam “taught” Balak. In his writing: *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 4, chap. 6.

Pergamum was ‘neokoros,’ or the central worship site, for the cult of Dionysus. The annual Dionysus festival would attract thousands of worshipers – like Mardi Gras to New Orleans – each spring.

Dionysus is the god of wine and party. His sacred animal is a bull.

Dionysus festival is marked by eating raw meat and wild sexuality.

12 “To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

13. I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives.

14. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

Gospel of John

At the festival to Dionysus you would ingest blood and raw bull meat to have the god infused “in you.”

The gospel of John records Jesus’ words about eating flesh and drinking blood in **John 6: 53-59**

Old Testament Text

Isaiah 11:4 and 49:2 reference the mouth (words of truth) as a weapon or sword.

God uses words to do battle whereas kings of the earth use actual swords.

Hebrew – *ha satan* – “the adversary” is the one who stands opposed to God. Which candidate at Pergamum stands opposed to God’s kingdom?

Numbers 22 – 24 contain the chapters that cover Balaam and Balak.

The “teaching” is not explicitly explained in the Bible, but by **Num. 25** – the Israelites are engaged in “sexual immorality” and “eating food sacrificed to idols.”

“Balaam” and “Nicolaitans” appear to be derived from the same root words:

niko = victory or conquer and *laos* = people.

In Hebrew, *Bala* = verb devour or conquer and *am* = people.

Nicolaitans then, are anyone who acts like Balaam did by enticing a Christian in the community to sin.

15. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

16. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Throughout the Bible we see the metaphor of your words (truth) as a weapon. See **Isaiah 11:4** and **49:2**.

In the New Testament Paul picks up this metaphor: **Ephesians 6: 17** as well as **Hebrews 4:12**.

Two principles:

1. we must speak truth. Truth is a powerful force.
2. We must know God’s words – both Old Testament and New.

Asclepius the god of healing

Pergamum was home to the famous temple to Asclepius – the god of healing.

If you had been healed by Asclepius, you would place your testimony on a “white stone” which archaeologists have found at the temple. You would inscribe your name and what Asclepius healed.

17. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it. (NIV, 2011)

The idea of “hidden manna” begins in **Exodus 16:31-34**. Aaron put “manna” in the Ark of the Covenant.

When the Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. the ark of the covenant was lost.

In **2 Maccabees 2** – which is found in the Apocrypha - it is recorded that the ark was taken by the prophet Jeremiah down to Mount Sinai to be “hidden” away.

When the Messiah arrives – the “hidden manna” will reappear.

Jesus is the Messiah and thus you will receive some “hidden manna.”

Gospel of John

John 5:1-15 recounts Jesus healing a lame man at the pools of Bethesda.

Archaeologists have discovered that there was a temple to Asclepius at the Bethesda pools. Is the man’s sin (Jn. 5:14) that he was worshiping a false god? Notice that only John records this miracle. John’s audience is in Asia Minor and they would be familiar with Asclepius.