

# Jerusalem Perspective Online

Exploring the Jewish Background to the Life and Words of Jesus

## The Teaching of Balaam

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***Revelation 2:12-16 is one of those occasions when it is necessary for the Christian reader to be familiar with first-century Jewish interpretation of an Old Testament account.***

Each May I lead a student tour to Greece and Turkey. During two weeks of travel and study, we explore the growth of the Early Church as it expanded from its Jewish setting in the Land of Israel and met the challenges of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles in the Hellenistic world. One of the profound realizations we have made is how much of its Jewish character the Hellenistic Church retained. In fact, the term “Hellenistic Church” should better be understood as a geographical description rather than one describing cultural identity.

On a recent trip, I was struck anew by the integration of Jewish methods of interpretation of the Old Testament in the letter to the church at Pergamum (Rev 2:12-16). On the one hand, the profoundly Jewish flavor of the Book of Revelation is surprising. It was likely one of the last New Testament books written. By that point in time, most scholars assume that Christianity was well on its way in departing from its Jewish context. On the other hand, scholarship has recognized the significant Hebraic influences on the Greek language of the Book of Revelation. These linguistic undercurrents may reflect the distinctly Jewish milieu of the apocalyptic work, telling us something about both the author and his readers.

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: “The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword: ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the *teaching of Balaam*, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality. So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.’” (Rev 2:12-16)

Already at the turn of the century, W. R. Ramsay suggested that “the throne of

Satan” was related to the fact that Pergamum was the first city in Asia to be awarded the cherished *neokoros* status, and granted the privilege to be the site of the first temple in Asia dedicated to a Roman emperor — Caesar Augustus. The pressure to demonstrate fidelity to the empire made the practice of emperor worship a necessity, and a challenge for Jews and for the Early Church. The Jewish king, Herod the Great, a century before the Book of Revelation, had built three temples to Augustus in Israel — at Caesarea, Sebaste (biblical Samaria) and Paneas (which was later renamed Caesarea Philippi). He did this to demonstrate his loyalty to his imperial benefactor. Yet, it seems that participation in the imperial cult was the focal point in the rebuke to the church at Pergamum.

For our limited study, I am particularly interested in the thrust of the author’s rebuke and the enigmatic reference to “the teaching of Balaam,” which seems to be derived from the author’s understanding of the Moabite prophet’s instruction to Balak. What is interesting is that no indication is given in the story of Balaam (Num. 22-24) to any advice by the prophet to Balak. Even less is it recorded that he encouraged the Israelites to participate with the Moabites in idolatry and sexual immorality.

Instead, this is one of those occasions when it is necessary for the Christian reader to be familiar with first-century Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament account. The letter to the church of Pergamum draws upon contemporary understanding of the Biblical event which had “filled in” Balaam’s role in Israel’s downfall. The genesis for this interpretative evolution is the obscure reference to the event in Moses’ words to Israel.

Moses said to them, “Have you let all the women live? Behold, these caused the people of Israel, in the matter [or, by the word] of Balaam, to act treacherously against the Lord in the matter of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord.” (Num. 31:6)

Greek translators of the Hebrew Scriptures already understood the Hebrew term *dabar* — which can be understood as “matter, thing, word, event” — to mean “the counsel or advice [of Balaam] to turn astray.”

Moses said to them: “Have you let all the women live? For they were to the Israelites in keeping with the word of Balaam *to turn astray*, to show contempt for the word of the Lord with regard to Peor, and a plague came upon the congregation of the Lord.” (Septuagint, Num 31:16)

So also in an early Aramaic translation of Numbers 31:6, the translators understood Balaam to have taken an active role in the sin of the Israelites: “They were a stumbling block to the Israelites *at the advice* of Balaam, to falsify in the name of the Lord in the matter of the idol of Peor” (Targum Neophyti on Num 31:6).

The first-century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, also expanded the Biblical account to provide the precise advice Balaam gave to Balak.

“You have in your countrymen, king,” he said, “women of outstanding beauty, and there is nothing to which a man more easily falls captive than a woman’s beauty....

“But you must instruct them not to allow their wooers to enjoy their charms at once...One of those (women) should say, with saucy air: ‘You must not be permitted to enjoy my favors until you have left the ways of your fathers and become a convert...if you are willing to take part in the libations and sacrifices which we offer to idols of stone and wood and other images.’”  
(Philo, *Moses* 1:294-298)

We witness the tendency of first-century Jewish interpreters to take advantage of ambiguities in the Biblical narrative to use the stories as vehicles to preach to their contemporaries. The expansions were not simply additions to the Biblical story, but an opportunity to caution their fellow Jews not to be enticed by the pagan idolatry which surrounded them or the loose sexual mores of the Greco-Roman world.

For their teaching purposes Balaam became a prime example of greed, idolatry and the evils which challenged the community of faith. This is in spite of the fact that according to the literal record of Scripture, Balaam did nothing wrong. He could certainly be faulted for being willing to speak against Israel. Yet, at the same time, he was one who had “knowledge of the Most High” (Num 24:16), and he had only prophesied what God instructed him. Thus, three times he blessed the children of Israel rather than following Balak’s request to curse them. However, through a creative transformation, this complex figure came to symbolize the challenges and pitfalls of the people of God in the first century. The “teaching of Balaam” in the Book of Revelation, which resulted in “idolatry and immorality” by the Christians in Pergamum, parallels the post-Biblical presentation of Balaam’s role in Israel’s downfall given in an early Jewish midrash.

“They called to the people and offered sacrifices to their Gods” [Num 25:2] for they followed Balaam’s advice...and set up tents and put prostitutes in them with all their finery.... Whenever a Jew would pass by in the market place...a girl would come out in her adornments and her perfume and seduce him by saying, “Why is it that we love you and you hate us — here, take this piece of merchandise for free — after all, we are both descended from a single ancestor, Terah, the father of Abraham. Wouldn’t you like to eat from our sacrificial offerings?” (Midrash Tanhuma, Balak 18)

Our study has brought to light the meaning of the “teaching of Balaam” in the letter to the church at Pergamum. We have seen that the notion is couched in contemporary Jewish interpretation of the story of Balaam with the purpose to address the spiritual challenges of the Jewish community living in a pagan world. Two points are particularly important for New Testament readers.

First, one should note how Jewish the letter to the Christians at Pergamum was — even at such a late date! Without an understanding of first-century Jewish interpretation of the story of Balaam, little sense could be made of “the teaching of Balaam” in the author’s warning. This fact argues against the common Christian opinion that from the day of Pentecost the Church was determined to depart from its Jewish context. The writer of the letter of Revelation and the congregation in Pergamum at the close of the first century A.D. still expressed themselves in profoundly Jewish ways.

Second, once again we see how important it is to engage first-century Jewish thought and faith to appreciate fully the message of the New Testament. Exploring the “Jewish roots of Christianity” does not mean simply a familiarity with the Old Testament, but instead, how that book was read and lived out by Jews contemporary to Jesus and his first followers. It underscores the immutable truth that Jesus came “in the fullness of time.” We as Christians living at the beginning of the third millennium must keep in mind God’s sovereign act in revealing Himself at a very specific point in history. As we look forward to the challenges before us, we must remember that our faith is founded upon one sent (not by accident!) at a particular point in time and in the midst of a particular people. It is these historical facts which must shape our reading of the ancient story to reveal God’s truth and determine how we might best serve Him in the present era.

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