

THE LOST LETTERS OF PERGAMUM

A Book Review

Presented to

Dr. Brian Vickers

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by

Chad S. Beck

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On my honor, I have neither given nor taken improper assistance in completing this assignment.
Chad S. Beck

Longenecker, Bruce W. *The Lost Letters of Pergamum*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003. 192 pp. \$

The *Lost Letters of Pergamum* is a fictional book written in the narrative form. The book is a compilation of several letters written between different prominent men of the first century. Although this book is fiction, “it does not mean these conversations did not take place (10).” The letters that make up the book were found and translated into English after the discovery of scrolls in the city of Pergamum. They were mainly a series of letters written by Luke, a Gentile physician; Antipas, a Roman businessman; and other individuals, both Christians and pagans, of the first century.

Bruce Longenecker, who studied and received his doctorate of philosophy (PhD.) at the University of Durham, gives us a glimpse of what might have taken place among those in Pergamum and surrounding cities at the turn of the century. The author’s method of placing these writings in a logical order of suspenseful events throughout the book keeps the reader captivated as the information is devoured. Longenecker not only displays his ability to take these letters and turn them into a significant piece of literature that leaves the reader desiring more, but in producing this work, he also reveals that he possesses true scholarly talents. He uses those gifts as a lecturer in New Testament Studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

Throughout the book, it is evident that the author’s intention is for the reader to have a front row seat to observe what is taking place in the story. The author brings his audience in closer to see the fine details within the conversations between the characters, as well as to see what is taking place in their day-to-day lives. It is as if he uses a microscopic lens to draw the

audience in and places them right in the middle of the situation. For instance, the specific details given in the seasonal gladiatorial contest that contained the mauling of humans to death by animals (178), the sickness of saints (151), and how the early church functioned is phenomenal. The gladiatorial contests were the central purpose in the start of these letters, which points the reader to a greater story inside the smaller story.

The narrative begins in the first century within the cities of Pergamum and Ephesus. Communication between a pagan and a Christian sets the stage for the reader. The first letter begins with an invitation to the seasonal gladiatorial contest in the city of Pergamum. Pergamum, along with Smyrna and Philadelphia, was known for the training of gladiators. Calpurnius, who is not enthralled about the events, receives the invitation to the contests and desires to represent his city, Ephesus. Although the book opens with a gracious invitation to the gladiatorial contests from Antipas, there would be a lot of discoveries that would lead him to his own martyrdom in the end.

An interesting transition in the story takes place when the reader is presented with the literature of Homer. Antipas sends a request for literature written by Homer from the library of Theophilus, the father of Calpurnius. Since Antipas has been studying Alexandrian history, Calpurnius graciously sends the copy of Homer by way of a servant. After receiving the copy of Homer, a shift takes place involving Antipas and Calpurnius' meeting for the seasonal gladiatorial contest. Calpurnius' brother's son dies suddenly, so he has to depart from Ephesus and go to Caesarea to be with his family. This misfortune opens the door for Luke, a friend of Calpurnius and a close companion with his father Theophilus, to begin corresponding with Antipas through letters. It does not take Luke long to begin speaking with Antipas about the man from Nazareth, Jesus Christ.

It is this relationship in the story that takes up the bulk of the book. Luke writes to Antipas and introduces him to people who call themselves Christians. These Christians are men and women who worship the God of Israel through this man who is fully God, yet fully man. Luke also describes Jesus as a man from “Galilee, who Antipas spent a lot of time there who he may find interesting to read about (37).” Luke tells Antipas that “many of us who call themselves Christians believe this Jesus to be the Jewish messiah, or Christ, and the human incarnation of the most high God (37).” This type of statement would be difficult to accept with the background knowledge of how society viewed Christians in this time; Christians were considered to be social outcasts who proclaimed a different lord (41), and no one of any significant social standing wanted to be connected with them. Although Antipas, who is a pagan worshipper of the gods Zeus, Olympios, and Jupiter, is unsure about these Christians, he acknowledges that the monograph of Luke would be interesting to study and agrees for Luke to send it.

Through their letters concerning the gladiatorial contest and the wellbeing of Calpurinus, Luke is able to tell Antipas more about Christians and the man named Jesus. Luke also tells of how “Nero clothed some of the Christians in skins of wild animals and set loose dogs on them, which promptly tore them to pieces (46).” This prompted more investigation and inquiry from Antipas regarding what kind of people would give their lives for such a belief in a God, especially a man from Nazareth. Antipas arrives at the conclusion that “Jesus seems a curious figure (64).” Antipas cannot fully comprehend how Christians could place their allegiance to this one man while the gods of Rome were fervently worshipped.

Luke and Antipas continue to grow in their relationship, and Antipas’ inquiries about Jesus and his followers become stronger than ever. Luke encourages Antipas to seek out Christians and go to their meeting. Antipas, along with another leader and sponsor of the

gladiatorial contest, Rufinus, arrive at the house of Kalandion on the Lord's Day. Antipas, who is asked to read Luke's monograph, is fascinated by his observations of the Christians. He notes that "the gatherers are very diverse with regard to their social statures, ethnic backgrounds, and civic positions (90)." It was evident something was different about these people. Antipas reported back to Luke, "I have never seen members of association act in that fashion (90)." What an impression the lives of Christians made on a man with nothing more than pagan roots. Although Antipas noted that his first impression of these Christians was positive, Rufinus on the other hand was very skeptical and superstitious.

As the letters progress, Antipas continues to inquire about this man named Christ. He asks Luke the meaning of different words used in his two volume monograph, such as the "Son of Man." Luke sends Antipas the reply along with other meanings to his monographs for the benefit of Christians meeting there in the house of Kaladion. Antipas becomes a regular meeting attendee and brings both his servant and Rufinus into the home of Christians where they are encouraged to act on what they heard. Although Rufinus attends the meetings, he wholeheartedly disagrees with the teachings of this peasant man from Nazareth who should be revered as Lord rather than the gods of Rome and the emperor.

Antipas is overwhelmed by the Christians' love for one another, their hospitality, and the deep family-like bond they possess. Antipas is asked to serve by helping oversee the new renovations to the temple Asklepion and the library in Pergamum. Antipas becomes closely connected to these Christians, particularly a girl named Nouna, who is being kept by Demetrius and Diotis.

Antipas and his companions make trips to other cities, and on these journeys, Antipas sees other Christian people living out their faith before him. This is especially evident whenever

Antipas is on his way home to Caesarea and is accompanied by a man named Simon. Simon falls desperately ill because he gives his place on a ship to a woman and her children in order to keep them dry. Once in Antioch, Antipas and Simon seek out other Christians so that Simon can receive the care he needs, and also so that both can receive some much needed Christian fellowship.

Antipas returns to Pergamum and finds the attacks on Christians have worsened since he left. Demetrius, one of Nouna's caregivers, had been taken into custody by the magistrates and was being held for retribution (164). After receiving the death sentence for not recanting the name of Christ as Lord, Antipas makes a plea on Demetrius' behalf and claims that he is the true reason for Demetrius's rebellion against the city magistrates. Antipas reveals to the emperor that he had financially supported Demetrius in caring for Nouna, the orphan girl. The change of Antipas' heart and his desire to willingly give his life for another Christian speaks volumes about how Luke's two volume monographs had changed Antipas' life.

Antipas comes full circle from being a pagan Roman businessman to a lover of Christ, even to the honorable point of giving his very own life for Demetrius. The letter concludes with the martyrdom of Antipas at the amphitheater on the day of the Pergamene gladiatorial games. Even as Antipas stands before the emperor of the city to pronounce his confession of Demetrius, Rufinus, who had also listened to the readings of Luke's monograph of the man from Nazareth in the gatherings with Christians, turns his head as though Antipas had never said a word. Antipas is then placed in the dead carcass of a bull, chained tightly, and mauled to death by the wild animals. As Antonious, a Pergamum nobleman who witnesses Antipas's death, reported to Luke, "I saw no sorrow for the terrible events that had now befallen his friend Antipas; instead, the look on his [Rufinus] face seemed to say that justice had been done (178)."

The author does a superb job in placing the letters in their logical progression as the story unfolds, from Antipas's letter of invitation (19-20) to Antionius's letter, to Luke sharing the new of Antipas's death (173-180). The book is well established in its presentation, as well as the historical information that is given to the reader. The author clearly gets his thesis across by establishing the heart of the book by allowing the reader to go back into history to glean the struggles and life of those in the first century. The author's expertise in New Testament studies is evident by the specificity of cultural settings, historical contexts, and the early Christians struggles. The reader is brought into the very lives of prominent first century men, one example is the story of a pagan Roman businessman who is radically changed by this man named Jesus; this achieves the heart of the author's point in writing this book.

The rich history and context of the first century is beautifully illustrated with details which gives the reader more insight to the events in this particular era. As a Bible student, it is exceptionally insightful and provides me with a new outlook on the New Testament. I believe a professor of the Bible, a seminary student, a pastor, or just a layperson can greatly benefit from this book. The author achieves his purpose in bringing more details to the history and context of what was taking place in the first century among not only the pagans, but among the Christians as well.