

# Jot & Tittle

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## **Pergamum in History and Prophecy**

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Pergamum, a city in western Asia Minor, was the location of the third church Jesus addressed in the opening chapters of Revelation. He warned the church about the dangers of spiritual compromise and described Pergamum as the place where Satan has his throne. Pergamum had a history of political and religious influence.

### ***Geographical Setting***

The acropolis of Pergamum held a breathtaking view of the surrounding region. “Situated on a hill about one thousand feet high and eighteen miles from the Aegean, the city commanded the fertile valley of the Caicus River and a land route into the interior of Asia Minor.”<sup>1</sup> Its location made it an ideal place for commerce and government.

### ***Political Background***

Pergamum’s history predates the Christian era by more than four centuries. “Coinage, with which Pergamum emerges into

history, goes back to the fifth century before Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Following the conquests of Alexander the Great, Pergamum won a measure of independence. “It became a stronghold of Lysimachus, until his commander Philetaerus rebelled and placed himself under the protection of the rival Seleucid kingdom. Philetaerus’ successors Eumenes I, Attalus I (241-197 BC, who took the titles ‘king’ and *Soter*, ‘savior,’ after defeating the Gauls), Eumenes II, and Attalus II extended his principality until it had the appearance of a major power, but on sufferance of the true and rising world-power of Rome.”<sup>3</sup>

Pergamum served as a buffer state between Rome and Syria and became an ally of Rome. “Like Smyrna, Pergamum read well the signs of history, and when Attalus III bequeathed the kingdom to Rome in 133 B.C., the legacy was no doubt approved by his people, who saw little future for liberty and independence in the growing chaos of the Middle East.”<sup>4</sup> Because of its strategic location and its cooperation, Pergamum became the seat of Roman government in the province of Asia. “Pergamum held the official honor of being the provincial capital of Roman Asia, though this honor was in fact also claimed by Ephesus and Smyrna.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Socio-Economic Significance***

As a crossroads of commerce, Pergamum enjoyed great wealth. It became a center of medicine, an identity that grew even stronger after the first century. However, Pergamum is best known in history as the location of the second largest library in the ancient world, competing only with the library in Alexandria, Egypt. The library at Pergamum boasted nearly two hundred thousand volumes. In fact, Pergamum’s competition with Alexandria led to the development of parchment as a writing material.

Tradition also records that in Pergamum, King Eumenes II (197-159 B.C.) planned to build a library to rival the one in

Alexandria. Ptolemy Epiphanes of Egypt (205-182 B.C.) took action to stop this venture by cutting off the export of papyrus sections. It was this embargo that forced Eumenes to develop vellum or parchment (*pergamene*, “from Pergamum”), a writing material made from animal skins.

Pergamum would have been an important center of learning, culture, and civic pride.

### ***Religious Influences***

Pergamum had a rich history of pagan religion. As a medical center, Pergamum had a temple complex dedicated to the god Asklepius. “. . . their characteristic god was Asclepius Soter, the god of healing, whose emblem of the serpent has attached itself to later medicine, but which was for the Christians the symbol of Satan.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to temples to Athena and Dionysus, Pergamum was the site of a throne-like altar to Zeus that dominated the acropolis of the city. Its massive size, extensive friezes portraying the mythic battles between gods and giants, and its regal appearance have prompted many to refer to this altar as the “throne of Satan” mentioned in Revelation 2:13. “It was discovered in 1871 and taken to Germany where it stands reconstructed today in the East Berlin Museum . . . . The structure, a perron of steps leading to a great altar, commemorated the defeat of a Gallic invasion two centuries before.”<sup>7</sup>

Most significant to the Christian era is that fact that Pergamum became the center of the imperial cult in the province of Asia. “The temple of Rome and Augustus established here in 29 BC was the first such temple officially sanctioned. The Christians in Pergamum faced a stark choice between Christ and Caesar, where Caesar claimed such titles as ‘Lord’ and ‘Savior.’”<sup>8</sup> Christians who refused to offer worship to Caesar were at times fiercely persecuted.

### ***Biblical References***

Within the New Testament, Pergamum is mentioned only in the book of Revelation (1:11; 2:12) as one of the seven cities addressed by the risen Christ. Revelation 2:13 mentions Satan’s throne, possibly a specific reference to the throne-like temple of Zeus or at least a general reference to the influence of evil in the city. Persecution of Christians had intensified by the end of the first century in Pergamum, and Revelation 2:13 mentions a martyr named Antipas along with another reference to Satan’s influence. In spite of Pergamum’s natural beauty and the splendor of its buildings, this city was really the seat of Satan, a center of evil. Too often wickedness is veiled by a veneer of apparent beauty.

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<sup>1</sup> Vos, Howard F. *Archaeology in Bible Lands*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1977, p. 329.

<sup>2</sup> Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*. Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1965, p 103.

<sup>3</sup> Hemer, C. J. “Seven Cities of Asia Minor.” In *Major Cities of the Biblical World*, R. K. Harrison, Editor. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> Blaiklock, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, Alan F. “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12. Frank E. Gaebelein, Editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, pp. 439-440.

<sup>6</sup> Hemer, p. 241.

<sup>7</sup> Blaiklock, p. 105.

<sup>8</sup> Hemer, p. 241.