

Alex Laird #4207
Fall 2009
New Testament, Dr. Gombis
Word Count: 1,913
9/14/09

The Lost Letters of Pergamum

Introduction

The Lost Letters of Pergamum, a book by Professor Bruce W. Longenecker, is a fictional compilation of letters exchanged between the fictional characters Antipas, a benefactor of Rome, and Luke, a physician and the writer of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. The book is artfully written to give the modern reader a glimpse into the context and culture of the first century Church. Longenecker presents a stunning display of Christ's life throughout these letters and the effects of his radical life on the culture.

Plot Summary

This book is a correspondence between Antipas, a self-proclaimed civic benefactor of the cities of Tyre and Caesarea in Rome and a worshipper of Jupiter, and Calpurnius, a nobleman of the city of Ephesus, which came to an end when the sudden loss of Calpurnius' firstborn sent Calpurnius away. Luke, a wise and passionate scholar with whom Antipas quickly grew acquainted, then began writing letters to Antipas in Calpurnius' absence. The fictional letters between Antipas and Luke span the entirety of 82 C.E. (Common Era).

Antipas had first written to Calpurnius to extend an invitation for him to attend the gladiatorial events in the coming spring. After Luke and Antipas began writing each other, their conversation tended toward spiritual matters once each learned of their shared love of the written word, specifically to Luke's following of Jesus Christ and his writings of Christ's life. Inevitably, the gladiatorial events and the horrific acts that accompanied them were discussed.

The two greatly enjoy discussing matters both historical and spiritual, topics that were common for first century discussion. As their discussion grew more spiritual and Luke shared more of the testimony of Christ, Antipas became more curious, started reading one of Luke's narratives about Jesus, and began sending Luke his thoughts. Antipas also joined a fellowship of Christians in his hometown led by Antonius and met with them regularly, there uncovering the direct effect the life of Christ had on the social norms in that day.

After the patient replies of Luke to Antipas' thoughts, and as Antipas continued his meetings with the local Christians, he understands that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and, disturber of the culture or not, the one that he should worship instead of Jupiter. This decision eventually led to Antipas' martyrdom for Jesus Christ in protest of the gladiatorial events in which one of his Christian brothers, Demetrius, was to be slaughtered. Antipas' actions saved the life of Demetrius and,

as punishment, Antipas was burned alive wrapped in the carcass of a bull, doing this for the glory of God.

First Century Understanding of Deities

Antipas and Luke have no trouble discussing spiritual matters, Christian culture, even Jesus Christ and the Son of God. However, in the first century, it wasn't unusual at all for scholarly men to discuss spiritual things. In fact, spiritual matters were probably the most prevalent discussion of the first century due to presence of many philosophers and great thinkers.

Antipas and his friends that occasionally write to Luke with him clearly had a good understanding of the role of gods and spirituality. They were noblemen, scholars, and philosophers. Their lives were steeped in knowledge of things higher than themselves, and as Antipas alluded to, they even had a basic knowledge of Christ, the great disrupter of society. What they did not understand was the relational and non-violent aspect of Jesus Christ.

First century peasants and noblemen alike understood the concept of deities, but the deities they frequently served were served out of fear, not out of love. They did not serve one god, they served many gods. In the Roman Empire, Jupiter was the king of gods, and that is why Antipas addressed him specifically when saying whom he worshipped.

The gods of Rome were not personable—they were supreme, unquestioned, and spiteful to those who did not worship them. The Emperor was the humanistic representative of the higher gods, and his words were all-powerful as well. The Emperor was considered a member of the Pantheon; he was a god on Earth. Because the Emperor served as the leader of the country, he likewise was able to enforce worship, hence the reason converting to Christ was such a major decision for Antipas. The idea of a relational God who desired to save the world from their sins was a radical idea that transformed the heart of Antipas, his concern and desire to worship shifted from fear to love.

Gospel Impact on a First Century Culture

The concept of a loving, caring, relational God was unfamiliar to the first century, and it came as an enormous shock to think that a god would want to be involved in a human's life. But it was blasphemy against Rome. The Emperor was god, and no one could question that. The possibility that there was another God, an exclusive God, thereby rending the Emperor as not divine, was cause for punishment by death.

As such, the gospel to a first-century audience was completely countercultural. To the ears of many, especially commoners, it was a saving tale, one that would release them from the oppression of their government. However, to the noble audience that was generally discussed in *The Lost Letters of Pergamum* who were loyal servants and benefited greatly from the Empire. These citizens saw the gospel as treacherous because it undermined their status, causing noblemen to be on the same level as the common people, since Christ called all men equal.

Euphemos, Antipas' friend, and Antipas write to Luke expression their concern with him associating with Christians. "If our understanding is correct, they

proclaim a different lord than the Emperor and promote a different empire than that of Rome. They frequently stir up trouble and have the blame for ravaging Rome, the imperial city, with fire [64 C.E.]” (p. 41). The gospel of Jesus Christ offended the ears of the noble and threatened the supremacy of their Emperor, so he frequently blamed them for any negative events that happened in the Empire. The views of the gospel were so counter-cultural and misunderstood, the confusion caused was debilitating.

Luke was not ashamed of his association with Christians, and he did not hesitate to tell this to Euphemos and Antipas. The gospel of Christ was the saving knowledge that the first century culture needed, and though it spoke blasphemy against the gospel of Rome, the freedom it offered was refreshing to common people.

Once noblemen like Antipas realized the true nature of the gospel of Christ, they realized it was not as threatening to the Emperor himself as it was to the attitude of the culture as a whole. It required a change in lifestyle, but it did not promote violence and hatred towards Rome as the Emperor and leading officials had everyone believe.

Antipas’ Gradual Conversion

Antipas was a nobleman, and a wealthy one at that. He boastfully opened his letters stating that he was a benefactor to two large cities in Rome, and he came from the prestigious house of Philip. He made no hesitation boasting of his high regard in his letters toward the first portion of the book, but as he grew closer to Luke, he began to address him more humbly, eventually opening one of his letters with, “Antipas, a nobleman of Caesarea; To Luke and the noble Calpurnius” (p. 157), thereby placing Luke and Calpurnius on the same level as he.

This transition of humility was significant, and Antipas grew gradually more humble through his redemptive process. His initial thinking toward Christians and Jesus Christ was that Christians were harmful to the great Rome, and that Jesus Christ was disruptive to proper society. But, as the letters continued and he became more curious of this Jesus person, Antipas’ attitude evidently changed as well as his understanding grew.

Luke was eventually able to show Antipas that Christians were not a threat to society but merely sharers of the Truth—that they loved the Romans and wanted to share life with them, but that their beliefs differed so significantly from that of the Empire they were not able to participate in all of the cultural festivities. After some correspondence, Antipas viewed the Christians as friends, but he still did not consider himself one of them. He merely decided that they weren’t a threat, but he was curious enough about their beliefs that he started meeting with them regularly.

Ultimately, after many questioning discussions with Luke and after Luke’s patient replies, Antipas came to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and was proud to call himself a Christian. He showed this in the most powerful way possible, by giving his life for a fellow brother in Christ, Demetrius. Though Antipas was a nobleman, when he entered the gladiatorial circle to offer his own life in exchange for the saving of Demetrius’ life, the Emperor treated him as a peasant. He agreed to spare Demetrius’ life, but he ordered Antipas to be dressed as a peasant and

slaughtered for the offenses of Demetrius. This act of selfless love was evidence of the journey to humility that Antipas had experienced in Christ.

Though the account of Antipas in *The Lost Letters of Pergamum* is a fictional one, Antipas was a real character of the Bible mentioned in Revelation 2:13, and it is likewise true that he was martyred for his Christian beliefs. This book lends a beautiful example for modern Christians of what true discipleship should be, as Luke showed, and what a true conversion and fanatic Christian lifestyle should look like, as Antipas showed. We should be willing to die for our beliefs and for the lives of our brothers. Ultimately, dying for these things is a death for the testimony of Christ, and that is what Antipas was living for in the end.

Contemporary Application

Today, the discussion of things that are spiritual is making a slight resurgence, but for the most part it still is not as seamless a transition to shift the discussion away from the natural to the supernatural as it was in the first century. In our postmodern culture, the gospel of Jesus Christ is not as culturally offensive as it was in the first century; it is separate and personal. People believe that the gospel is good for you, but feel they are just fine without it. It seems like it has lost much of its offensive power with our culture. We as Americans often think we are persecuted for our beliefs, but taking a harsh word because of our beliefs from someone is nothing compared to being beaten or ultimately murdered as a spectacle for an entire empire. Christians today remain stagnant, most content to live life just barely over the fence—safe from Hell, but not interested in investigating Heaven any further. We should live with the fire in our souls that Antipas grew to have.

Conclusion

The Lost Letters of Pergamum is a historically accurate fictional account of the first impression towards Christians and the gradual redemption of Antipas. Though it is a fictional tale, much information regarding the New Testament and first century culture can be gleaned from its pages. Written from the perspective of two first century friends, Professor Longenecker has captured the picture of a lifestyle that Christians today should strive to mimic.