

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 360

Revelation 2:1-7

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Teacher: Dr. Michael S. Heiser (MH)

Host: Trey Stricklin (TS)

Episode Summary

This episode resumes our series on the Old Testament in the book of Revelation. Revelation 2 raises questions about the identity of the angels in the early chapters of the book, an identification that is linked to the lampstands. As noted in earlier episodes, the lampstands have a distinct supernatural (members of God's council) context, drawn from the Old Testament. How does that context work in Revelation 2-3, where John is instructed to write to the angel of each church? In addition, who are the Nicolaitans? In this episode we explore how the Old Testament contributes to answers.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 360: Revelation 2:1-7. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! How are you doing?

MH: Pretty good. You know, Trey, we have been in Florida now for a little over a year. I'm a Floridian. I'm Florida Man now.

TS: Yeah, you mentioned that last time. And I just need to know if you've gotten a tan since then.

MH: No. I don't know if I'm proud of that or not. But I do not have a tan. That might change next year. You know, the place we got did not have a pool. That was sort of by design. There were things that we needed to work on and fix up. So it's taken six months, but we now have a small pool in the back yard. Of course, it's too cold to use it, but you know, that's just how things worked out. It just took overly long to do this. And sure enough... My only fear with the pool is Mori. Because I don't think for a minute that Mori can swim. Yes, I know dogs are supposed to be able to swim by nature. You have not met Mori, Okay? [laughter] So sure enough, I get a text this week from Drenna and she says, "Guess what? I opened the door and Mori charged out and went right into the pool!" [laughs] She had to jump in after him.

TS: With the water?

MH: With the water. I'm glad the water was in it or else he could've broken a leg or something. It's only five or six feet deep. It's a small pool. But he went right in the water. [laughs] She said he just sank like a rock. She goes... I'm getting the narration here, "Oh, he's starting to come up to the top." But she jumped in and got him. And he was fine. But we've now decided that we cannot just let Mori out to do his thing without being on a leash until we arm him properly—until we clothe him properly. So I bought a dog floatie this week. It has not gotten to the house yet. But I can't wait. I can't wait to put it on him. Because then he can run around, and if he just happens to charge into the pool, he'll be okay.

TS: Oh, that's funny.

MH: He'll bob right to the top.

TS: Well, what if he goes in upside down?

MH: I got one for Norman too. She didn't say whether he went upside down or not. He just sank. [laughs]

TS: Yeah, well, I mean, if you put the floatie on him, what if he floats to the top upside down?

MH: We'll find out. Yeah. It shouldn't. If the thing... It's a dog life jacket, so it's not just, like, a Walmart floatie. But it's supposed to be a life jacket for dogs. Okay? So we got him one of those and it should be here today or tomorrow. And I also got Norman one. Norman I know can swim. He'll love it. So we got his with a little shark fin on it. He'll just be trucking around. But Mori, that's a hazard. [laughs] Sure enough...

TS: Well, was Mori able to swim at all? Was he at least...

MH: Not according to Drenna. So what we're going to do when it gets warmer (we're not going to dip him when it's cold), we'll put this thing on... I mean, I'll put it on him just in case he jumps in again. We'll do that right away. But in the summer we'll put him in just to see if he can kind of do it, like, the motion.

TS: Yeah.

MH: But even if he can, he's going to need the flotation. So yeah [sigh], there we go. Mori's big adventure.

TS: Are you sure you didn't get that pool just for the dogs? Or did you get it for you all, too? I mean, are *you* going to use this pool? I can't imagine you out there...

MH: I did [get it just for the dogs]! [laughs] That was *my* motivation. We had a pool when I was growing up, and I never went in it. Because I don't really swim. I could probably tread water for a few hours to save myself, but I'm not a swimmer. So I never went in the thing. And I'm not *planning* to go in this one unless it's just to have fun with Mori and the other dogs. But everybody else is more into it than I am. All I want to see is pugs in the pool. Then I'm happy.

TS: Yeah.

MH: That it was worth the investment. [laughs]

TS: Yeah, there you go. That's a good visual as we...

5:00 **MH:** It raises property value, so it was easy to talk me into it. You know? Okay. Pug in the pool, value of the property. I don't really have to use it. If I've got those two things, it'll be good.

TS: Well, that's a sweet image (pugs in the pool) as we go through the book of Revelation here.

MH: [laughs] It's kind of apocalyptic. Is that your point? [laughs]

TS: No, it's pretty cute! It's the opposite of apocalyptic.

MH: Right. Something to balance all the disaster stuff in Revelation. Okay.

TS: Absolutely.

MH: Yeah, if you (listeners) get frightened as we go through the book of Revelation, just think of pugs in a pool. That'll calm you down.

TS: There you go. Absolutely. I'm excited to get back into Revelation. We had a nice little break, and I'm ready to get back into the Bible.

MH: Yeah, me too, to be honest. I mean, I like doing interviews. But I kind of like to build a little momentum, too. So I'm glad we're back. And we are jumping into Revelation 2. There's one item listeners may recall: we skipped the Death and Hades part of Revelation 1, and we're going to pick that up when we hit that phrase again later, which I mentioned when we were going through Revelation 1. But just to mention it here again. So we're moving right into chapter 2, and we'll wait to pick up the whole Death and Hades thing, which I think people are going to find real interesting. But for today, it's really the first seven verses. You know, I don't know... I think next time we'll probably just finish the whole chapter, but for right now, the first seven verses, which I'm going to read and then we'll jump into it. Our point here is, "How does the Old Testament get repurposed? How does the Old Testament contribute to understanding what we're reading?" So this is

the letter to the church in Ephesus. It's the first seven verses. And I'm reading ESV. It says:

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

² "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

So there are lots of things we could sort of point out here. There's the reference to "my name's sake," which ties in with the Name theology. Again, we spent a good bit of time on Name theology in the podcast, so I'm not going to dig in there at all.

It's very obvious, "the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand..." This is ostensibly the source—the origin point—of the message. And this is Jesus, who we've seen in prior lessons here (prior episodes) is identified with God. And then at the very end here in verse 7, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the *Spirit* says to the churches." Ah, so now the Spirit is the one giving the message. Well, is it the Spirit? Is it Jesus, who is God? Or God? And the answer is, "Yep." Again, you get another one of these indications where... This is the sort of thing where Trinitarian thought comes from—this co-identification.

And again, we've spent a lot of time on that in other books and different ways. So I want to focus on some different things here that actually have some sort of specific root in the Old Testament that we haven't spent so much time with in other episodes of the podcast, or even my books. So... Before we do that, though, I think it's probably reasonable (since we've had several interviews in between here) to review where we've been. To this point in the series, we've discussed Revelation 1, except for verse 18. (That's the "keys of Death and Hades" reference.) And we'll get to that later, when we get into chapter 3. We've looked at seven spirits or stars or angels identified with seven churches. This is all Revelation 1. And the term "lampstands" is looped into that. The seven

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churches are identified as these lampstands per Revelation 1:20. We've seen Jesus, the glorified son of man, is in their midst. (That's Revelation 1:13.) We looked at how the exalted son of man figure comes from Daniel 7 (a familiar passage to this audience), where the son of man gets the "deity" epithet (the one who rides on the clouds or comes with the clouds). And that chapter (Daniel 7) has the Ancient of Days, with the hair and clothing white as snow and pure wool, with a throne of fire. But Revelation 1 attributes that imagery also to the son of man, where Daniel 7 doesn't do that. Daniel 7 has these two characters (Ancient of Days, son of man). In Revelation 1, John merges them. Then we talked about why John does that—to identify Jesus and God and so on and so forth.

So Jesus we have in Revelation 1, God as man in the midst of the seven spirits and the stars—the seven angels—identified with the seven churches. Now the lampstands point to churches, but we've also seen in earlier episodes that the seven lamps (the seven lampstands are really lamps—menorah branches) are an allusion to Zechariah 4:1-2 (where we have one standing lamp with seven branches—the classic menorah figure). These seven lights—these seven lamps in Zechariah—are further identified in Zechariah 4:10 as "the eyes of the Lord which range through the whole earth." And we've seen in earlier episodes that these are divine beings. This is Divine Council imagery—members of the heavenly host. We looked at Eric and Carol Meyers, their commentary on Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 for that, where they talk about the eyes of Yahweh being language that's used of God's omniscience and omnipresence. And that's true, but there's more to it. Because how is God described as doing that, keeping tabs on everything? Well, that's through the agency of the members of the heavenly host, which gets you into the heavenly books idea—that God has agents that travel to and fro throughout the whole earth as the eyes of the Lord keeping tabs (keeping track) of everything that's going on. And we looked at A. Leo Oppenheim's article on that very subject (the eyes of the Lord) from the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* back in 1968. This is all Episode 355.

So these are the paths that we've gone through or down. And so to try to simplify here, the eyes of the Lord... Yes, it's an expression of God's omniscience. But the extension of that omniscience seems to be that the eyes of the Lord are his heavenly agents. And the churches (the angels, the lampstands, all this language) is bound together. You can't really talk about one of these things (the churches, the angels, or the lampstands) without talking about the others. They are different yet inextricably linked by the language.

Now all that's necessary in terms of review because of a line we're going to encounter later in Revelation 2: the message for the church at Ephesus. So again, let's jump back into Revelation 2, the first line. So "to the angel of the church in Ephesus write..." So ostensibly, John is instructed to write to this angel (whatever or whoever that is). Now the language here is why some interpreters think the angels are the pastors or the human leaders of these churches. "John's writing a letter to that guy," or whoever. Now that might sound right, but it's

actually problematic. And you probably have already sensed that because of the identification of the angels and the lampstands and the churches and the stars. Can you really neatly separate the people in the church from the church collectively from the eyes of the Lord? How do you parse all these things out? And the answer is, “You can’t really do it neatly. They’re inextricably linked. Even though they’re different things, you can’t really talk about one without talking about the others.” So that’s the general problem. To this point when writing about churches (up until chapter 2), there’s been no mention by John of specific human leadership, only supernatural guardians or supervision (the eyes of the Lord). Recall again that John associates the menorah light branches (the lampstands) with the angels/spirits/churches. And that association, plus the supernatural nature of the “eyes of the Lord,” strongly suggests that the angels of the churches are *not* human leaders. That’s the other side. Now in his Revelation commentary, Aune writes this:

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The term ἄγγελος [*angelos*] “angel, messenger,” occurs seventy-seven times in Revelation in both singular and plural forms. Only eight of these references are problematic, those that refer to “the angels of the seven churches” (1:20) and the seven occurrences of the singular term ἄγγελος as the particular addressee of each of the seven proclamations to the churches [MH: the first one we’ve run into here is Revelation 2:1, but there are others throughout these two chapters] (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Since most of the sixty-nine occurrences [MH: that are left] of the term ἄγγελος or ἄγγελοι [*angeloi*] [MH: that’s the plural] refer to benevolent supernatural beings who serve as mediators and messengers between God and his creation, ... Most scholars presume that the eight problematic references must also refer to beneficent supernatural beings.

To shorten that up, you’ve got 77 occurrences. Sixty-nine of them are not ambiguous. They’re supernatural beings. The only ones that aren’t are when the term is linked to the churches here. So Aune is saying, “Look, odds are pretty good that maybe we’re better off looking at “the angel of the church in _____” is also a supernatural being. Now in my *Angels* book, I also note that the notion of supernatural agents assigned to or watching over churches is quite possibly a New Testament adaptation of the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. Now I have to stop here and say, if you’re listening to the podcast, maybe you just started listening to the podcast and you have no idea what the Deuteronomy 32 worldview is. I can’t go through it here. On the front page of the podcast, there’s a tab or a button at the top. It says, “Start here.” And there’s a video explaining what the Deuteronomy 32 worldview is.

So back to the *Angels* book, in that book I discuss the “angels to the churches” issue, and one of the suggestions is that we may have a New Testament adaptation of the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. Specifically, within that worldview you have the nations (other than Israel) assigned to lesser sons of God—lesser *elohim*. And they become corrupt and so on and so forth. Again, if you’ve read

Unseen Realm, this is all old news to you. And so all the nations besides Israel that God disinherits at Babel are under dominion of some other supernatural beings. And this is how the Old Testament explains why there are other gods of the nations and where we get pantheons and all this kind of stuff for these nations. Israel, though, prior to the book of Daniel, is Yahweh's property. This is his domain. It's his inheritance. It's his possession. It's the nation he takes (according to Deuteronomy 4:19-20) for his own.

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Now in the book of Daniel, we read... And scholars speculate on why this is. I'm not going to go down this bunny trail too far. But in the book of Daniel, we learn that Michael (one specific angel who is one of the chief princes) is the guardian, if you will, of Israel. And some people think that this is because God is sort of distanced here because of the exile and all this kind of stuff, and this is why Israel now has a placeholder like all the other nations, and it's not directly with God, because we have... In a sense, it's another way to communicate Israel in exile. Again, I'm not going to go down that bunny trail too far, but this is the situation you get in Daniel. And so the idea of a supernatural being assigned a guardianship or a supervisory role of the people of God is a biblical one. When you get into the New Testament, what you have is you don't have the people of God associated with one geographical place or entity—a national Israel. You have the people of God scattered everywhere in little groups called churches. And so the notion that you would have [an angel] playing some sort of guardianship role or supervisory role, it very well could be a New Testament adaptation of the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. And I think in this case, because elsewhere "angel" is clearly a supernatural being, and also because the angels of the churches are tied in with the lampstand imagery, which are the eyes of the Lord, which are clearly supernatural beings, I think this is probably the best way to go. So I'm sort of fronting where I'm going to go with all this so that you kind of are able to track with me early on.

Now I also noted in the *Angels* book that the answer to this question ("Are the angels human leaders or supernatural agents?") is ultimately answered I think... This is a big element to bring alongside the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. It's ultimately answered by the grammar of Revelation 1-3 in the immediate contexts of each letter. What do I mean by that? Well, let's use Revelation 2 and Ephesus as an example. Okay? This will be a little more detailed than what you might find in the *Angels* book. So again, just heads up. So we have here Revelation 2:1:

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"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Now if you noticed, the angel is addressed. The Lord tells John to tell the angel (whoever or whatever that is) that the message is coming from God (or Jesus—the one with the stars in his hand), who walks among the seven golden lampstands. Again, this is Divine Council, heavenly throne room imagery. None

of that means anything to a human leader. Okay? Like, if a human leader is being addressed, it makes less sense to sort of loop the human into that picture or that imagery, or remind them of that imagery, as opposed to if we have a supernatural being, that this is the headquarters place. Okay? This is where you were tasked. If the addressee is an angel, in other words, one of these lampstands... There are seven lampstands, remember? The seven churches. Ephesus is the first one. So Jesus walks among these lampstands, who again are the eyes of the Lord (which is Divine Council members and so on and so forth). It just doesn't seem to fit a human being. But if this is a supernatural being, all the imagery makes sense. The language makes sense. If the addressee is an angel, one of the seven lampstands, or one of the stars that are with the lampstands, so on and so forth, that would be in concert with the Zechariah material (Zechariah 4). I would also say, we don't have to think of the semantic of the phrase "write to the angel" as speaking of a literal recipient. It's not like John's writing a letter and he's going to go hand it to an angel. Okay, that's an over-literalism that doesn't make any sense on one hand, and isn't necessary on the other. You could read the phrase this way. The Lord tells John to write "*concerning* the angel of the church in Ephesus, or "in regard to" or "with respect to the angel of the church in Ephesus." Those are semantic options that don't require John literally handing off a letter to a supernatural being. Okay? The wording loops in the angel, though, with what follows. And I think that's important. And what follows are comments about the state of the church in Ephesus—the group of human believers that the angel is overseeing, or at least watching or keeping tabs on. So verse 2:

² "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

Now all of these things are what you'd expect Jesus to say to human believers who are struggling to remain loyal to Jesus. But the pronouns used here: "your works," "your toil," "your patient endurance"; and then verbs: "you have tested," "you are enduring," all this stuff, they're all grammatically singular. So you would ask, "Well doesn't that mean we have to opt for John writing to the human leader of the church at Ephesus, because the verbs here are singular?" The answer is no. Singular Greek grammatical forms are used of collective entities—in this case, churches. I'm suggesting here that the Lord instructs John to write things in his book "in regard to" the believing community, which is overseen by a supernatural agent, akin to the Deuteronomy 32 worldview, where Michael was God's agent in spiritual warfare over his people. At that time, it was one community called Israel. Now it's churches. So you see, if you look at it that way,

it blends the supernatural aspect (a supernatural being overseeing this congregation) and it also loops in the church collectively.

And by the way, it doesn't make really any sense to have one individual—one leader, one pastor—as the subject of “your works,” “your toil,” “your patient endurance.” It's not just one guy that's being commended. It's a whole church. It's a collective entity. And likewise, when churches get blamed for things, it's not just one person; it's them collectively. So how do we merge the collective sense of this evaluation? (Because all these letters are going to be evaluatory of these churches.) How do we loop the collective sense of what is being said to these churches (the entity, the body, the congregation) with this angel? And again, I think the best way (I'll just say it again) to merge them together is that God is instructing John to write things in Revelation in regard to the whole church (the believing community) which is overseen by a supernatural agent (an angel) akin to the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. I think that's the easiest way to marry these two things together and make sense of the language. Let's go to verse 4:

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⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.

Well, I think verses 4-5 make the perspective I just sketched out pretty clear. These are all singulars again (“against you,” “you have abandoned the love,” “you have fallen,” “repent”—a singular command). To me, it defies credibility to think that the point of this language is for either one supernatural agent assigned to the church that they're getting blamed, or one human pastor. Rather, it's one group that is getting evaluated here. “The *church*, which is at Ephesus.” I think Revelation 2 begins very clearly. I mean, who does it say that the letter is actually and ultimately to? It's “to the angel of the church in Ephesus, write...” So we've got the angel (the supernatural guardian) and the church collectively. So how do we marry those two things together? To me it just makes little sense to say that one human being is being isolated out as the recipient of this letter and getting the credit or the blame. It just doesn't make very good sense to me. On the other hand, it makes good sense for the singulars to be pointing to the body of believers at Ephesus (the whole church), that they need to... “Here's what you're doing well. Here's what you're not doing well.”

Now we get to this line. He says, “Repent. Do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and *remove your lampstand from its place*, unless you repent.” So what is the threat? There's a twofold aspect to this, since the lampstand and its star (or its angel) are inextricably linked. (Again, because of the lampstand imagery in Revelation applying to the church, but in the Old Testament being used of supernatural beings... Again, these things are merged.) You have to look at this in two ways. There's a twofold aspect to this. The lampstand and the star are linked. The church and its angel are inextricably linked—the church and its

supernatural guardian. You can't really distinguish them neatly and separate them. Basically, if the church at Ephesus doesn't get its act together, the Lord is going to recall its lampstand (its supernatural agent, its guardianship). That's the threat. "We're going to call this guy home." Which means the church's effective presence in the world... I mean, if the angel here is supposed to be a helper or a guardian or an overseer (all these things)... Angels do lots of things, okay? The threat to say, "Well, I guess your work is done here. Come on back"... To me, it's the New Testament church (the Revelation 2) equivalent of Judges chapter 2, where the Angel of the Lord in that case shows up and says, "Hey. You failed at the conquest. I'm leaving. You're on your own. I'm out of here." So it has that kind of a flavoring. It's a judgment. For God to remove the guardianship (or the angel who is there to assist in some way or to observe or whatever the angel is going to do at any given point) is to treat his people at Ephesus as though they are not his. Their job is over. It's a chastening.

And by the way, the connection to Israel there should be apparent. God does do this to his people. He withdraws his presence. The Glory leaves Israel before the exile. We're familiar with these passages. And the Angel of the Lord in Judges 2 says, "I'm out of here. I'm no longer going to lead you." So again, mapping these ideas over to each other, the concepts are not far. The concepts are present in the Old Testament. The lampstand being removed "from its place," that is, this supernatural agent will cease to play a role in you people being a kingdom of priests and a priestly witness at Ephesus. Because that's your job. That's your job. And if you think about parallels to Israel again... Here we go. It's the Deuteronomy 32 worldview seeping into the New Testament context. When the Angel of the Lord leaves, then you get the period of the judges, which is a disaster. And God doesn't forget them. He intervenes in a number of places, raises up judges, and so on and so forth. But the whole point is that this is going to be even more of a struggle. It's going to be even worse. So "you need to go back to 'your first love.'" And I think the interpretation of that phrase derives from this discussion. The ESV has, "You have abandoned the love that you had at first." Now this "first love" imagery certainly has Old Testament echoes. It seems to come from passages like Jeremiah 2:2... Let me just read that real quickly.

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The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ² "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD,

**"I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.**

So this "first love," this bride, God's bride in the Old Testament... But again, in Judges chapter 2, God in the form of the angel says, "I'm leaving." [laughs] You

know? “You’re not showing allegiance. You’re not showing loyalty to me,” in the conquest situation, going back to the book of Judges. And that doesn’t work well. So they have ceased to... There’s a question mark there about their... “Are you getting the job done or not?” And in Israel’s case, “No. You’re not.” Ezekiel 16:8 is another one of these, where you get this “love” language—this “bride” language for Israel.

⁸ “When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine.

It’s this marital marriage imagery used of Israel. So a number of scholars think that the “first love” idea has some attachment to these passages. Beale, in his Revelation commentary, writes this, and I think appropriately. He notes that the “loss of love” should not be understood as generally a lack of love for Jesus. Verses 2 and 3 really defy that. Let me read verses 2 and 3. And this is how you’ll often hear the passage preached, unfortunately. But verses 2 and 3 pretty much deny it. [laughs]

² “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil [MH: they haven’t switched sides], but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false [MH: they’re not swayed by false teaching]. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

I mean, they’re believing. They haven’t buckled under the threat or the specter of unbelief. That is not what’s going on here. That is not what’s going on here. And I think Beale is right to point this out. Again, to summarize him, he says the issue isn’t that the Ephesian believers are falling away or rethinking their loyalty to Jesus. (Again, I’m just summarizing Beale’s thoughts.) Jeremiah 2:2 and Ezekiel 16:8 both have the covenant relationship between God and his bride in view, so if verses 2 and 3 have the Ephesian believers hanging on to their faith, they’re not severing from it. They’re not going after somebody else. They’re not committing spiritual adultery or anything like this. They’re not succumbing to unbelief. So what’s the problem? In what respect are they failing? And what Beale does is he directs his readers to Matthew 24:12-14. Given the apocalyptic context of Revelation, Beale brings this passage up. And here’s what it says:

¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of

the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

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The lawlessness referred to in that Matthew passage (again, summarizing Beale's thoughts here) is not the worldliness of believers. They haven't become worldly. They haven't given up. Rather, the context (back in Matthew) is the persecution of believers and the deception of believers with false teaching. It is, in a word, opposition from unbelievers. But more importantly, back in Matthew, verse 14 links the idea of "the love of many tapering off" not with succumbing to heresy or false teaching or worldliness. They're enduring under that, just like in Revelation 2. Rather, it links "the love of many tapering off" to God's desire that the gospel be proclaimed throughout the whole world. That's both the reason the church is opposed, but it's also the mission. Beale suggests that the waning love of the Ephesians is not their own believing loyalty. That's secure. But their lack of witness to the people of Ephesus—to the nations. If you look at the wording of Revelation 2:4, the antidote to abandoning the love they had at first is to "do the works they did at first." Beale comments,

This explains the loss of love as unfaithfulness to the covenantal task [not the covenantal theology—the belief system—who the true God is—that's not in question] of enduring in preaching the gospel 'for a witness'.

So I think that that... To me, that makes sense. It makes sense out of the Matthew passage. It makes sense out of what the church in Ephesus is commended for, but they still lack. Again, you have to take off the table the things that they are certainly not being blamed for. They don't have a problem with unbelief. They don't have a problem with being duped by false teachers. Yes, they see all that stuff. Yes, they're under persecution, but they're holding up. They're suffering for the Lord's name's sake and all this kind of stuff. They're holding up. "Nevertheless, I have something against you. You've left your..." This "first love" idea. And again, if you go back to the Matthew passage, this idea is linked to taking the gospel to all the nations. And so Beale wants to tie that knot here, and I think that makes sense. I think that's consistent thinking.

By way of a modern analogy, let's talk about current events here and current context. By way of a modern analogy, when our political culture begins to persecute the church in the years to come (and it *will* come), will your impulse be to bring them to the Lord (to bring your enemies to the Lord) or to get revenge? Is it, "Well, you're headed for hell; the Lord's going to judge you. He's going to take care of you anyway." That could very possibly (especially in Ephesus)... I mean, consider in the book of Acts what happened in Ephesus with Paul and the riots and all this stuff. That could very well be the context of the early church in Ephesus to whom John is writing. They were targets. And Jesus wasn't of the mind to let an attitude that wasn't about winning them over to his family go unchallenged or unchastised. You're here to expand the kingdom, not win an

argument, and not be comfortable. The church around the world... We're going to need this message in the years to come. I just know we will. The church around the world is growing (it's *growing*) under persecution. And the church in America needs to follow suit. We're not an exception. The mandate of the Great Commission (of Jesus) is not going to change. So when you're put in situations like the people of the church of Ephesus, when life just becomes either hard or irritating (whatever level of severity), is your first impulse going to be, "We need to win these people to the Lord?" Because this is why we're here. This is why we're here on earth. This is what God wants us to do. This is the mandate Jesus gave us before he left—before he ascended. Or is it, "We're going to get revenge. We're going to show you." You know? [laughs] It's just something we're all going to have to think about.

40:00

And if we go back to Ephesus, they are in a difficult, difficult situation. They are trying to... We've got the civil authorities—the Roman world. Christians get targeted time and again. Some of the persecution gets really bad in historical pockets. But news flash: Christianity is not legalized in the Roman Empire until the late 300s A.D. That's over 200 years later. This is not an officially politically recognized belief system or sect. They are viewed with suspicion for any number of reasons. We've probably all heard background information about the situation with the early Church—how the Romans thought the early Christians were atheists because they wouldn't offer sacrifices to the gods. It was a goofy thought, but you could see how they would get there. You had Christians that either resisted going into the military in the early Church, or if they were there, they had divided loyalties because of their allegiance to Jesus as opposed to their commanders in certain situations. So that put them in a bad reputation. There were just any number of reasons why, if you were an early believer... And this is post-Nero. Nero's in the 60s. So regardless of your view of the authorship of Revelation, you're in a post-Nero context. When I bring that up... Because Nero villainized the Christians. All over the Roman world, there's nobody that's embracing these people. So they're in a tough spot.

And yet, the letter here addressed to the Ephesians doesn't say that they're fainting and failing or succumbing to unbelief. They're not. None of the above. But apparently, if we loop this passage back to the one in Matthew that Beale brings up, they've let the missions slide. Their love for the people they're left to win is disappearing. It's waning. They're losing enthusiasm for doing ministry among these people. And again, before we beat them up too harshly, it was a serious thing to reveal to someone that you were a Christian and to talk about Jesus. "Do I want to let them know that there's a church here in town?" You know? This is very much... There's an underground flavor to a lot of these situations. There can be any number of reasons why the early Church is just losing enthusiasm for what they're supposed to be doing. And this is what the Lord is concerned with. "Because this is why you're here." We could go to any passage in the Gospels that talks about, "Hey, don't be amazed if people hate you." [laughs] Jesus says, "They hated me. You're not going to be better off."

This whole sense of co-suffering. Peter's letters are full of this. This is the context for the early Church. And to me it makes sense that in view of what they're not failing at, that this particular thing makes sense to sort of target or zero in on, as far as the Lord having a problem with what's going on in the church of Ephesus. To me it makes good sense of all the options.

Now before hitting the Nicolaitans (that's verse 6), I want to jump to verse 7. So in Revelation 2:5, you have the removal of the lampstand. It's sort of like a negative motivation to remember you're supposed to be the New Testament version of a kingdom of priests here (tying it back to Israel). Because we're tying it back to the Deuteronomy 32 worldview and Revelation uses this language of the churches. You're supposed to be a kingdom of priests and so on and so forth. We've seen that language in other episodes. So the negative motivation is, "I'm going to remove your lampstand. I'm just going to call your angel back. You're going to be on your own." As positive motivation, though, for returning to one's first love, John is instructed to write in verse 7:

⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

Now it's really obvious in this verse... The Old Testament antecedents are very transparent. This is about the future destiny of the believer—the new earth, modeled after the pre-fall Eden. Since the Great Commission is linked by Paul in Romans 9 to the Gentiles being brought in (the people the Ephesian Christians are supposed to be witnessing to), and that, in turn, is linked to the Lord's return (the awakening of Israel, the healing of the nations, and the new Eden), the warning here given to the Ephesians actually matters. [laughs] In other words, "If you don't be about the Lord's business, you are contributing to the forestalling of all that's yet to come. And all that's yet to come is just lots of good stuff. The Lord's going to get his way. We're going to have a new earth—a new Eden. The Lord will return. If you don't do the job, then that contributes to this getting stretched out." So we have a negative and a positive impetus to get with the program again, or remember the program.

45:00

Now to verse 6 and the whole issue with the Nicolaitans. Now I'll have to be honest: I wouldn't really spend any time on this except for the fact that it has a peripheral (or at least a theoretical) Old Testament connection. Let me just read the verse before we jump into this. Verse 6 gives this commendation:

⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

So who are these people? Now Aune, in his Revelation commentary writes this:

The Nicolaitans are mentioned explicitly only in [MH: Revelation] 2:6 (in the proclamation to Ephesus) and 2:15 (in the proclamation to Pergamon). In 2:6, it is simply said that the Ephesian Christians hate the works (i.e., the behavior) of the Nicolaitans. In 2:14–15, the “teaching of Balaam” is apparently identical with the “teaching of the Nicolaitans” and consists of eating meat previously sacrificed to pagan deities and the practice of fornication.

So let me read Revelation 2:14-15. It says:

14 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, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. 15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

So either those two things are different or... Aune's opinion is that it's two ways of pointing to the same problem. He wants to merge these things. So Aune goes on to wonder if Revelation 2:20-21, which refers to “that woman Jezebel” (another Old Testament allusion) might also be linked to the Nicolaitans because both that description (the woman Jezebel) and then back here with the Nicolaitans in verses 14-15 are described in relation to eating meat sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. These are common threads between both of these passages. There is also speculation (and Aune believes it's really not coherent) that the Nicolaitans are to be linked to the Jews and the so-called synagogue of Satan (also in Revelation 2, in verse 13). I would agree with him. I think that's utterly incoherent. Since the “synagogue of Satan” idea doesn't have an Old Testament context in view (or that phrase isn't used in the Old Testament), I'm not going to land on it specifically in a future episode. (This isn't a verse-by-verse series. You have to remember that.)

But for our purposes here, though, the Jews can be safely ruled out with respect to the Nicolaitan problem in Revelation 2:6 and 2:20-21. Why? Well, the reasons are pretty straightforward. The crimes (the concerns) are idolatry and eating meat sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. Okay, when you're talking especially about idolatry and meat sacrificed to idols, these are not Jews, okay? [laughs] That ought to be really obvious. We're not talking about Jews here. So this “synagogue of Satan” idea is not the Nicolaitan problem.

So let's go back to the Nicolaitan stuff. The sin of Balaam is clear enough (Revelation 2:14-15). Israel was led to worship idols and commit sexual immorality as a result of his influence and counsel. We can read about that in Numbers 22:5 all the way through Numbers 25:3 (a whole section of the book of Numbers there). It also gets picked up in Numbers 31:8 and 31:16. And Beale writes of this whole Nicolaitan thing—this issue or this problem of identification:

Balaam was a pagan prophet hired by Balak, king of Moab, to pronounce a curse upon the invading Israelites. God prevented Balaam from doing so and caused him to issue a blessing on them instead (Num. 22:5–24:25). However, Balaam subsequently devised a plan in continued disobedience to God whereby some of the Moabite women would entice the Israelite men to “defect from the LORD” (31:16) by fornicating with them and joining with them in the worship of their pagan gods (25:1–3). This plan was successful, and God punished the Israelites for their idolatrous involvement...

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Balaam became proverbial for the false teacher who for money influences believers to enter into relationships of compromising unfaithfulness, is warned by God to stop, and is finally punished for continuing to disobey [MH: and biblically we see that in] (Num. 22:7; Deut. 23:4; Neh. 13:2; 2 Pet. 2:14–16; Jude 5–12; Philo [MH: talks about this in some of his books, and Beale gives you the citations], *De Vita Mosis* i. 264–314; *De Migratione Abrahami* 114)...

So this is what Balaam is known for. He became proverbial for the false teacher who for money influences believers to do all this stuff. Beale continues:

The episode from Numbers is applied to a group of false teachers in the church of Pergamum because a principle of theological continuity was discerned between the two situations.

Now let me read that again:

The episode from Numbers [MH: all the Balaam stuff] is applied to a group of false teachers in the church of Pergamum because a principle of theological continuity was discerned between the two situations.

The false teachers were arguing that believers could have closer relationships with pagan culture, institutions, and religion than John thought proper. This is the significance of the expression “to eat things sacrificed to idols and to fornicate,” which applies here not only to the Numbers account but also to the problem in Pergamum, as is evident from the application of the identical phrase to the situation [MH: later on] in Thyatira (2:20). Although some contend that εἰδωλόθυτον [*eidōlothuton*] can refer to *meat which has been dedicated to an idol* and then sold in the marketplace (cf. Paul’s use in 1 Corinthians 8; 10:23–30) [MH: even though some contend that that’s how we should take what’s going on here (it’s meat that was dedicated to an idol and then sold in the marketplace)], the focus here is on eating such food in the context of idolatrous worship (which was also a problem in Corinth: [MH: we learned that from] 1 Cor. 10:1–22). This is clear from the parallels drawn with Balaam and later with Jezebel (cf. 2:20), both of which concern blatant idolatry.

Now as a sidebar here, Beale in a footnote draws attention to something that Ben Witherington III has written. And he notes this:

B. Witherington has now shown that all uses of εἰδωλόθυτον [*eidōlothuton*] in the NT, including 1 Corinthians, refer to “meat sacrificed to and eaten in the presence of an idol, or in the temple precincts”.

And that citation is from an article by Witherington entitled, “Not So Idle Thoughts.” (Ben loves puns. Those of you who caught our interview with him way back here on the podcast know that.) So he does it again here in an article title (“Not So Idle Thoughts”). The point is that, “Look, we don’t have a contradiction here between what John is saying in Revelation 2 and what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10. Because in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul says, ‘Look, don’t eat meat sacrificed to idols because you’re going to enter into fellowship with demons.’” That’s 1 Corinthians 10:21-22.

So back in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul says, “Hey, look, we’re believers. We know that an idol is nothing. For us, there’s only one God,” and so on and so forth. And then you get to chapter 10 and he’s freaked out, like, “Don’t do this! You’re going to be in fellowship with demons!” And what he’s talking about is eating the meat in participation with a ritual or on unholy ground, so to speak. And in 1 Corinthians 10, a few verses after he warns them about fellowshiping with demons, he says, “Look, if you find the meat at the marketplace, yeah, it was sacrificed to an idol, but now you find it at the marketplace, that’s not so much of a problem. That’s okay. It’s permissible.”

Actually in 1 Corinthians 10 he’s talking about issues of conscience (1 Corinthians 8-10). So there’s a difference there. And what Beale is saying and what Witherington is saying is, “Look, what John is concerned with is not a contradiction of Paul’s allowance to eat the meat that had been sold in the marketplace. That’s not the case. The people who take that trajectory are wrong.” And Beale is citing Witherington’s works saying, “Everywhere that this term is used, you can connect it to the sacred space of a foreign god (pagan turf, so to speak) or some ritualistic involvement. That is the sin of Balaam. That’s participation in and with idolatry. So that’s what John’s after. That’s what Paul was after. And Paul’s allowance in 1 Corinthians 10 about eating meat sold in the marketplace, it’s not the same thing.

55:00

So to mop up, does this really help us identify the Nicolaitans? What’s in a name? Now Aune notes that the Nicolaitans do get discussed by a number of Church Fathers. Most of them (if not all of those references) seem to be based on Revelation 2:6, Revelation 2:14–15 (the verses we’re talking about), but it gets combined with a specific name, Nicolaus, who was one of the seven deacons according to Acts 6:5, and a heavy... So the Church Fathers are looking

at this name, they're looking at Revelation 2, Nicolaitans, and basically Aune says, what the Church Fathers are doing is taking the references in Revelation, taking this name in Acts 6, and then basically... I'll use his wording: "using a heavy admixture of legend and imagination." [laughs] Basically he says they just make up stuff, to come up with an identity for the Nicolaitans that has no basis in either the New Testament or any other early writing as far as the identification of the Nicolaitans. You can't trace them back to this deacon in Acts 6, is his point. And who are the Church Fathers who do this? Aune references Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian (some famous Church Fathers). But he's like, "They're just making it up. There's no basis for this."

Now Aune makes that observation and Beale follows him as well. I mean, Beale is of the same mind. They think that the name has nothing to do with Nicolaus in Acts, but it's symbolic. And this explanation, I think, seems to have something to it—that this isn't a specific actual group, but the name itself is symbolic. It's using etymology to create an association of the idolatry problem with Balaam. So another way of saying that is the terms (the names), both of Balaam and the problem of idolatry, you can break that name up etymologically and then that was used to create the linkage to what's going on in Ephesus that John is writing about. Let me just quote Beale's explanation. It's a lot more succinct and coherent:

Some suggest that "Nicolaitans" could be merely another name for the Balaam sect, since their teaching is emphatically equated with that of that other group: "*in the same manner* (οὐτως) you also have some holding the teaching of the Nicolaitans *in the same way* (ὁμοίως) [MH: later on at Pergamum]." The two teachings are identified further by the similarity of the etymology of their names [MH: so here we go]: νικᾷ λαόν means "he overcomes the people," and in rabbinic literature "Balaam" (*bil'ām*) was etymologized to *bela' 'am* or *balah 'am*, "he who consumes the people" [MH: that's from rabbinic writings] (e.g., *b. Sanhedrin* 105a), or it could be construed as "rule over the people" (*ba'al 'am*).

So you have part of the Nicolaitan name and the Balaam name (depending on how you divide the syllables and the etymology you use), they can mean kind of the same thing—this devouring of the people, overcoming of the people. The actual participation in idolatrous situations, Beale feels, sort of reflects the idea that when the people are participating in idolatry, it overcomes them. The church at Pergamum gets (pardon the pun) swallowed up by—they get consumed by—their idolatry. It's not so much true, obviously, of the church at Ephesus (which was our focus for this episode) because they're not going down this rabbit trail. They oppose the Nicolaitans. But there's a greater concern later on at Pergamum for the effect that this idolatry and the immorality is having on the church. We'll get to that in the next episode, as well, a little bit more.

1:00:00

So Beale and Aune and other scholars are saying, the name is probably chosen in Greek, going back to the quote, νικᾷ λαόν, “he overcomes the people, who conquers the people.” So whoever’s teaching them to do this is starting to conquer believers. And since the term *balah ‘am* could be etymologized the same way, that’s why John creates the connection. He wants his readers to understand that what’s happening here in Ephesus and Pergamum and these churches, this is akin to what went on in the days of Balaam.

So it’s not that you actually have a sect that takes a name (Nicolaitans) and they hang a shingle outside, “The First Church of the Nicolaitans.” It’s not an actual sect or people group. Rather, it’s a label to put on those who are seducing believers into idolatry and immorality. And the connection with Balaam is done through the word meanings—the etymology. I think that’s better. I don’t know that that’s certain. But it’s better than saying, “Oh, it’s probably some followers of this guy Nicolaus in Acts.” Well, it’d be different if you had a textual record of that. But the Church Fathers don’t have specific references textually to that. They just sort of glom on to the idea, as, going back to Aune’s quote, it’s an “admixture of legend and imagination.” They don’t really have anything to hang their hat on, but it sounded good. It was a way of explaining it. Whereas if they had gotten into the Hebrew etymology (which is asking a lot for early Church Fathers who didn’t know Hebrew)... If you’re going to do that, then you can kind of see how the two things would fit together.

So that’s an Old Testament relationship. Is it really repurposing the Old Testament? Well, you know, a little bit. Kinda sorta. If this is what’s going on, John seems to be aware of it and wants his audience to think about the situation they’re in. He’s going to ask the church at Pergamum do the same thing. “Consider what’s happening here. This ought to take your mind right back to Balaam, and what a disaster that was, both in terms of what was happening (boots-on-the-ground) and God’s response to it. You do not want to go down this road.”

So we’ll just wrap up chapter 2 (or at least the first seven verses) with that. And again, next time we’re going to try to finish chapter 2. We’ve already dipped into the second half of it with some of the Balaam stuff. But we’ll revisit that a little bit and pick up some of the other material. But that’s where I’d like to stop for today and I think it’s a good place to stop and sort of sets up what we’ll do next time.

TS: Alright, Mike, sounds good. I’ve got a few questions about the Nicolaitans, but we’ll hold off on that. The only question I really have is, “Who are they?” But like you said... How long ago do you think they existed?

MH: Well, I don’t... I’m with Beale and Aune. I don’t think it’s a specific group that would’ve identified themselves by that name.

TS: Yeah.

MH: I think it's a label given to them to imitate in Greek what the term "balaam" could mean in terms of its etymology—the parts of the word (the one who conquers or the one who devours, that sort of thing). So I don't think it was a specific group. I think this is John's way of linking these people who are seducing believers in the church to idolatry, linking that back to Balaam. Because if you take the name "Nicolaitan" apart, it's "our people are getting consumed," and if you take "Balaam" apart and do the etymology there, it's "he who consumes" as well. So I think that's why he used the terminology, not to point to a historical group.

TS: Alright, Mike, sounds good. Well, we'll look forward to the rest of chapter 2 next week. And I guess that's it, Mike. Alright, we appreciate it. With that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.