

THE LOST  
LETTERS OF  
PERGAMUM

A STORY FROM THE  
NEW TESTAMENT WORLD

SECOND EDITION

BRUCE W. LONGENECKER

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For our son Callum:

May the narrative of your life be marked out by honor

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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The story you are about to encounter explores what might have occurred during the final year in the life of a man named Antipas. We know about Antipas from the book of Revelation. There we learn that he was martyred for his faith in Jesus Christ in the city of Pergamum. So we read in Revelation 2:12–13:

To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

There must have been an intriguing series of events leading to Antipas's punishing death. Those events, however, have been lost in the sands of time. We will never know who Antipas was or the episodes that provoked his martyrdom. But we can speculate. And that is what transpires in this story—a story that arises from one supposition, one fact, and one tradition.

The supposition is simple: that the Antipas mentioned in Revelation 2:13 had been named after Herod Antipas, the son of Herod

the Great and pro-Roman tetrarch who reigned over Galilee during the time of Jesus's ministry.

The fact is equally simple: that this Antipas died as a martyr for Christ in Pergamum, where pro-Roman sentiment and emperor worship were rampant—a fact alluded to in Revelation, which speaks of Pergamum as the place “where Satan has his throne.”

Add the supposition to the fact, and a protonarrative emerges of one who began life dedicated to the advancement of Rome and ended his life as one perceived to be an enemy of Rome. Add to this the ancient tradition about Antipas's gruesome martyrdom (narrated later in this book), and the narrative virtually writes itself. A storyteller needs only to fill in the blanks—something I seek to do in a historically reliable fashion throughout the story you are about to encounter.



The ancient philosopher Aristotle once wrote, “The perfect friendship is that between good men, alike in their virtue.” The following narrative explores some of the dynamics of friendship, goodness, virtue, and honor in the ancient world of the Roman Empire, in which Jesus and his first followers proclaimed the message of a different empire (“the empire of God”) and enacted distinctive forms of friendship, goodness, virtue, and honor.

# EDITOR'S PREFACE

## *The Discovery*

Let us now praise famous men.

SIRACH 44:1

It wasn't until we opened the casements and began to probe their contents that we realized the full extent of the discovery we had stumbled upon. Entombed within those casements, hidden from human eyes for nearly two thousand years, lay the fragile but miraculously preserved literary remains of famous men. The ancient city of Pergamum had generously given up one of its last remaining secrets, and I had been the beneficiary of its generosity.

The discovery was itself a corporate find. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, archaeologists from Germany, the United States, and Turkey took a keen interest in excavating the ancient site of Pergamum. Previous excavations of the ancient city had already uncovered some of its remains, but there was much more to do. And so I joined the archaeological teams already in place, bringing with me a small team of archaeologists sponsored by my university.

In the course of our excavations, the remains of ancient temples and civic centers of various kinds were unearthed, along with a variety of ancient houses. When excavating one of these houses, my team discovered three lead casements that had purposefully been stored away. The casements had long ago been sealed with pitch and wax, placed within a recessed space between the remains of two stone-wall partitions, and entombed within a low-grade concrete casing.<sup>1</sup> Ultrasound explorations of the casements revealed what appeared to be documents. Experts in papyri and parchment manuscripts were given the task of extracting and examining the documents. Although fragile, those documents proved to be enormously resilient against the effects of time and emerged from their makeshift tombs virtually intact. In only a handful of insignificant places has there been need to postulate what the original text might have been.

What follows is the first English translation of these intriguing ancient documents. The collection involves an exchange between well-placed and influential persons based in both Pergamum and Ephesus.<sup>2</sup> These documents were clearly treasured by their long-deceased owner, who at some point gathered them together and stored them to keep them safe and perhaps (in light of some of their contents) to keep himself safe.

The primary figures in the exchange are (1) Antipas in Pergamum, an elite pro-Roman businessman, and (2) Luke in Ephesus, an important figure in early Christianity whose two-volume work (the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts) comprises more than one-quarter of the New Testament. Although we know something about Luke from his writings contained in the canon of the Christian church, almost nothing has previously been known about Antipas, who comes to life through these letters as a figure of great interest.

Since a few of the extant letters are dated according to day and month, we know that the exchange takes place over a period of ten or so months (mid-January to early October), with several indicators in the letters suggesting that they were written in the year 92 CE.<sup>3</sup> In my translation, I have ordered the letters according to their content rather than their strict chronological sequence so that Antipas's letters are followed immediately by the relevant response from Luke, regardless of how much later those responses might have been written.

Sometimes chance encounters between people start out as inconsequential but become life changing. If a chance encounter brought Luke and Antipas together, these letters indicate that such an encounter did not remain inconsequential for long. Neither should it remain Pergamum's secret any longer.

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1. It has not been possible to discern the identity of the house in which the lead casements were discovered. In all likelihood, it was the house of Antonius, who plays a large role in the narrative conveyed by the letters.

2. In the ancient world, scribes frequently made copies of private correspondence prior to the delivery of the original documents to their intended recipients. The parchment documents discovered at Pergamum appear to include copies of Pergamene letters sent to Ephesian residents in some cases, and in other cases the original Ephesian letters sent to Pergamene residents. The one who long ago placed the letters in their protective casements, therefore, appears to have been a resident of Pergamum.

3. In the majority of cases in which specific dates are not mentioned, I have provided estimates in footnotes as to the date of each letter. Readers who choose to disregard these footnotes will not be at a disadvantage in understanding the basic unfolding of events. But the estimates may benefit those interested in precise chronological sequence.

— LETTER COLLECTION — 1 —

AS ONE NOBLEMAN  
TO ANOTHER

## ANTIPAS'S LETTER

Antipas,<sup>1</sup> son of the nobleman Philip, civic benefactor of the cities of Tyre and Caesarea, freeborn citizen of the blessed empire of Rome, and worshiper of Jupiter, Zeus Olympios the Savior;

To the most excellent Calpurnius, son of the distinguished Theophilus, benefactor of the people of Ephesus, nobleman of the Lydian region;

Greetings.

On this tenth day before the ides of January [5 January], I write to you, most excellent Calpurnius, as one nobleman to another, with an invitation from Lucius Cuspius Pactumeius Rufinus, a leading official of the city of Pergamum and one to whom I have committed myself. Rufinus has managed to earn from our great emperor Domitian the honor of sponsoring two days of gladiatorial contests in the course of the next year. As you may have heard, Rufinus's father, Drusus, has recently died and has left an endowment along with instructions for sponsoring two gladiatorial days in Pergamum. These instructions are being implemented by Rufinus himself, who will use the occasion to celebrate the memory of his father as an esteemed citizen of the empire, as well as to celebrate our beneficent gods and our illustrious emperor, whose guiding spirit fills the empire.

The first gladiatorial day will take place on the thirteenth day before the calends of April [19 March; the "calends" is the first of the month]. The second will fall just before the autumn equinox on the sixteenth day before the calends of Domitianus [15 September].<sup>2</sup> These days will adorn the great city of Pergamum, whose citizens are even now full of anticipation.

Rufinus has conscripted me to undertake several organizational tasks for these gladiatorial contests, which I am happy to do. One of those tasks includes extending an invitation to the honorable men of the region, bidding them to attend and thereby helping to promote harmony among the great benefactors of our regional cities. Since you rank among that esteemed number, it falls to me to request your presence at the first of these occasions. You would be one of six officially recognized representatives of the noblemen of Ephesus, Pergamum's sister city in concord and itself a promoter of Rome's magnificence. You will have a place specially reserved in the *tribunal editoris*, designated for highly regarded civic magistrates and other noblemen alongside the holder of the contest. Although the emperor has agreed to offer part of his own gladiatorial troupe for the occasions, he himself will not be in attendance. Nonetheless, many esteemed citizens will be gathered, and we hope that you will be among that number. Should you and your entourage require housing for the event, I have a list of Pergamene noblemen who will gladly extend hospitality to visiting noblemen. Simply let me know your needs, and I will make the necessary arrangements.

The gladiatorial school here at Pergamum is making preparations for the event, and we have notified the gladiatorial schools in Smyrna and Philadelphia as well, each of which have agreed to supply contestants for the first event. Gladiators from Galatia and Egyptian Alexandria will also be there. At present just over one hundred gladiators have been purchased for the day, but Rufinus is hopeful for more. If you meet with any itinerant *lanistae* [owners of gladiatorial troupes] who are not aware of these events, we would be in your debt if you would pass on the information. They should make contact with Rufinus of Pergamum directly.

Euphemos of Pergamum, my honorable host, also sends his greetings. Stachys, my servant, delivers this message. If your response to this message is not delayed, he is at your service for delivering your response to me. He should be no burden upon you. I have instructed him to find accommodation at a local inn if you require him to remain overnight before delivering your response.

May the gods continue to bless you and your household.

## CALPURNIUS'S LETTER

Calpurnius of Ephesus, son of Theophilus;

To Antipas, nobleman of Pergamum;

Greetings.

You have honored me with your kind request for my attendance at the gladiatorial contest in the spring. The occasion falls just prior to a voyage that I hope to make, so I should be able to attend. I am not a keen enthusiast for the contests, you should know, since throwing men to wild beasts or watching them kill each other in combat for the amusement of spectators has never seemed to me either prudent or tasteful. But your invitation is gracious, and I am concerned to preserve healthy relationships between the cities of Ephesus and Pergamum. Their long-standing competition for civic honors and prestige has too frequently induced an unhealthy enmity between the noblemen of our two grand cities. While I applaud civic competition to the extent that it sharpens our interest in promoting the beneficence of our own citizens, I regret the lack of concord that occasionally transpires. For that reason, although I will not revel in the contests, I nonetheless consider it my civic duty to comply with your gracious invitation and represent my fair city in the Pergamene games. The riot that broke out between the people of Pompeii and Nuceria at a gladiatorial competition some thirty years ago clearly indicates the severity with which Rome looks upon intercity discord, with the emperor forbidding further shows in Pompeii for a decade and rewarding the senator who sponsored the competition with exile. There is a need for intercity cooperation in events of this sort, and so I will be content to play a role in ensuring civic stability. I am

greatly honored by your invitation. I will make my own housing arrangements for the time that I am there, since I have strong ties with certain leading men of Pergamum.

Your host, Euphemos, is himself a man of high repute, and your association with him in Pergamum is sure to prosper. Please send him my regards.

Your servant Stachys has been no burden. Upon my insistence, he was provided with food and accommodation at my own house. I did not want to subject him to one of the crude local inns that are famous for their bedbugs and foul practices. I send him back to you with a gift of friendship for you, along with this brief letter.

Farewell.<sup>3</sup>

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1. As in most ancient correspondence, the sender (i.e., Antipas) is identified first in the letter, and the addressee (i.e., Calpurnius) is identified second.

2. At this time, Domitian had renamed the months of September and October “Germanicus” and “Domitianus,” respectively. The traditional names were reinstated after Domitian’s death.

3. If Antipas wrote his letter on 5 January, his messenger Stachys would have departed from Pergamum on 6 January and arrived in Ephesus on the afternoon of 9 January. If Stachys then left Ephesus on 10 January, he would have arrived back in Pergamum on 13 January with Calpurnius’s reply.