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## Another look at the Nicolaitans

by W. M. Mackay

*The late Major W. M. Mackay of Dundee, formerly Senior Lecturer in Electrical Engineering in St. Andrews University, was a reader of The Evangelical Quarterly from its inception, and an occasional contributor to it. This last contribution was written a short time before his death on November 12, 1971. He was for long a student of the Apocalypse, in the exposition of which he followed a line of his own. He was particularly dissatisfied with the explanations given of the Nicolaitans, and wondered if his solution would commend itself to some of our readers.*

ON the identity and tenets of the Nicolaitans the approach external to the New Testament has yielded nothing in any way decisive. Most commentaries account for them by bracketing them with other heresies mentioned in the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. A common procedure is to link the Balaamites, mentioned in the letter to Pergamum, with the Nicolaitans mentioned in the same letter, making their offence a recrudescence of the Old Testament type of idolatry combined with fornication. This treatment makes it appear probable to the commentator that in Thyatira the trouble was more or less the same; the Jezebelites become equated to the Balaamites, and the Nicolaitans are made to include both.<sup>1</sup> By some the false apostles appearing in Ephesus are also identified with this sect.<sup>2</sup>

One is left with the impression of the existence in these churches of a heretical sect, practising idolatry and immorality, bearing the general name of Nicolaitans, but exhibiting variations in different localities which are illustrated by the attachment of the names Balaam and Jezebel.

There are some obvious weaknesses in this interpretation. The letters in Revelation, while addressed in the first place to particular churches, and dealing in praise or rebuke with their specific conditions, are recognized as carrying a general message to the churches of all ages. "He that hath an ear" is admonished to draw lessons from them. It would appear strange that three categories of offence of such apparent importance at the end of the first century should be capable of being disposed of down a common drain, carrying no further message of any practical relevance for the churches of our

<sup>1</sup> Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. "Nicolaitans"; *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, s.v. "Nicolaitans".

<sup>2</sup> N. Turner in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, new edition (1962), on Rev. 2:2.

own day. This treatment greatly contributes to, if it does not also spring from, the idea that Revelation is a book whose message has been exhausted in the first century and whose presence in the New Testament is now a matter of curiosity.

The book of Revelation is one which declares itself from the beginning as proceeding by the use of symbols, and we are led to expect considerable precision in their use (Rev. 1: 20). Now in the other cases in the book where immorality is mentioned, it is used with a spiritual significance. The virgins of ch. 14: 4 represent saints. The fornication of Babylon in ch. 14: 8 is spiritual defection. The scarlet woman of ch. 17 is a spiritual apostasy. The first three chapters of Revelation differ from those following in that they deal mainly with things present while the subsequent chapters treat of things future; but in essence they follow the same methods and use the same type of symbolism. It would therefore appear that the immoralities associated with the names of Balaam and Jezebel in Revelation must represent in the first instance defections from the faith. This is not to assert that immorality was not practised under the aegis of certain heresies. We are well aware that it was. But the essential implication of adultery in Revelation is spiritual apostasy.

Further, if three different names are used we must expect that three different heresies are being designated. "Thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam," followed by "so hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans," does not permit us to merge the two into one. The book is much too exact and consistent to allow such careless procedure.

The use of Old Testament imagery to describe conditions in the Christian Church is one of the most significant aspects of Revelation. Within the compass of the first three chapters we have our Lord as high priest walking in the midst of the seven golden lampstands and referring to the tree of life, the book of life, the hidden manna (that laid up beside the ark), the key of David, and the pillar of the temple; and using the word "Jews" to signify Christians. This is entirely in keeping with the references to the temple and its furniture, and to the twelve tribes, in the later chapters.

A Balaam heresy on this basis would be a pernicious system established outside the borders of the church, in which church members participated, and by so doing compromised their Christian profession. The use of an Old Testament analogy, in place of a direct reference, would represent the situation in general terms, continuing applicable in the church of all ages. There were trade guilds and similar organizations in the first century in which pagan religious ceremonies were involved, and which would give rise to problems of this nature. At Pergamum, the worship of Aesculapius,

the god of healing, could well have furnished the conditions for the existence of a Balaam type of defection. In our own day, any worldly activity which is incompatible with true discipleship is of this nature, whatever pleas may be made on its behalf; and the original Balaamites were self-assertive.

A Jezebel system, on the other hand, would be one which penetrated the church itself, ousting the truth, and setting up its pernicious teaching within its borders. Various forms of Gnostic heresy could have filled this role in the end of the first century.<sup>3</sup> Of this type of operation there is no lack of modern instances.

Against recurring apostasies with the same basic characteristics it appears much more probable, and much more proper, that warnings couched in general form should appear in letters designed to meet the needs of the Church in all ages, than that they should simply convey a rebuke of practising sexual looseness in combination with religion, a laxity which would immediately testify against any church giving countenance to it. As a case in point, we have only to notice the contempt which the church of the west drew upon itself among common people in pre-Reformation times by its condonation of sexual licence in its orders.

There remain, however, the Nicolaitans. If they are not to be identified with these other sects, what further inference is it possible to draw in regard to them?

Well, in the first place there is their Greek name. The only other Greek personal name in the book is Apollyon, which is identified with Hebrew Abaddon, and so is an individual name only. Nicolas is the only Greek personal name used to designate a faction. Assuming that the names Balaam and Jezebel have the force above attributed to them, why was not a Hebrew name used symbolically to designate the Nicolaitans? A sufficient answer would be that a comparable precedent either had not occurred, or more probably could not occur, under the old economy. This must be a heresy special to New Testament times.

In the second place, when the Nicolaitans are first mentioned, in the letter to Ephesus, it is their deeds which are stigmatized. Only in the second reference, in the letter to Pergamum, is their doctrine mentioned. In the two other cases the doctrine is first mentioned, and then the evil deeds which flowed from it. In any heresy bad doctrine and evil deeds will both be present. Bad doctrine will issue in evil deeds; evil deeds will require the support of bad doctrine. With the Nicolaitans it would appear that bad practices were adopted, resulting in perversion of the truth.

<sup>3</sup> R. M. Grant, in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, 2nd edition (1963), ed. F. C. Grant and H. H. Rowley, s.v. "Gnosticism".

In the third place there is the traditional report that Nicolas was one of the seven deacons. Whether this be the case or not, the above references agree with it to the extent at least that the heresy in question appears to have arisen within the church itself, and not to be one dependent on outside influences.

As an example of a type of heresy which would in part at least meet the above requirements, and which was of sufficient importance to be classed with the other two, we have that of the Judaizers, who were so much a thorn in the flesh to Paul. The ceremonial observances which they advocated were right and proper under the shadow system of the Old Testament, but they became a denial of the substance once the Christ had actually appeared to provide the salvation which they typified. Two immediate objections arise. This combination of shadow and substance came so naturally to all Old Testament believers, the apostles included, that the attachment of the name of one man to the practice would have been quite out of keeping. Then also the destruction of Jerusalem, which we assume to have taken place a generation before the book of Revelation was written, must have put a complete and speedy end to the activities of the Judaizers. The assumption of an earlier date for the book would not substantially affect this conclusion.

This may, however, suggest to us the line along which the solution may lie. The craving for outward symbols which regulated their practice to such a large extent did not disappear with the destruction of Jerusalem. It is a natural element in the human heart, which has troubled the church in all generations. During the period of the church's persecution, or liability to persecution, we cannot expect to find detailed matter regarding this or any other heresy. Those who are heretically minded are not usually of the stuff of which martyrs are made, and in time of stress they would no doubt find means to conform to the imperial requirements. The true church would be reborn after each persecution, purged from those elements which tended to obscure her witness.

With the revolution which took place in the position of the Christian church with the accession of Constantine, the situation was completely changed. The heresy with which we associate the name of the Nicolaitans, and to which we attach the general name of ritualism, grew apace. For example, Constantine himself delayed baptism till he was on his deathbed, under a mistaken idea then prevalent that there occurred in this sacrament a kind of baptismal regeneration to which was attributed the same kind of efficacy as came to be ascribed later to extreme unction in the Church of Rome. Under the term ritualism we include all departures from Scriptural teaching and performance in the two sacraments of Christ's own appointment, and all appointments of calendars,

rites and ceremonies which are without New Testament authority. The requirements of "decency and order", under which an attempt is made to justify some of the latter extravagances, are actually of a much more modest nature, and by those seeking spiritual worship on New Testament standards the dividing line is not found hard to draw.

At the Reformation, the churches which adhered to the Reformed position threw overboard the accumulation of practices unauthorized by Scripture which had overgrown both the eastern and western branches of the church. The subsequent history of Reformed Christianity shows that ritualism, which we have equated with the practice of the Nicolaitans, is a heresy of sufficient importance to be classed along with the other two heresies, which at first sight we might consider more formidable. Not only so, but it is hardly to be expected that churches in which such a system prevails will have given serious consideration to the arguments, however sound, for so identifying it. This may explain to some extent why so little that is helpful on the subject has appeared in standard commentaries.

We cannot agree that our Lord would incorporate in his letters to the churches warnings against movements to whose characteristics no clue is given. Revelation is a book which yields its analogies between sign and thing signified only to those who are prepared to devote hard study to the process; and the methods which point to a probable identity of Nicolaitans with ritualists are of the same kind as those required in the analysis of the rest of the book.

To sum up, the three great obstacles to the witness of the church in all ages are:

- (1) Worldliness, the church mixing in worldly things to a degree which compromises her witness;
- (2) False doctrine, the church becoming a nursery of heretical beliefs; and
- (3) Ritualism, the church setting up a system of shadow practices which smother the underlying truth.

It is submitted that the names Balaam, Jezebel, and Nicolas in the second chapter of Revelation apply respectively to these defections.

*Dundee.*