

Epistle to the Colossians

One of the four Captivity Epistles written by St. Paul during his first imprisonment in Rome — the other three being Ephesians, Philemon and Philippians. That they were written in prison is stated in the Epistles themselves. The writer mentions his "chain" and his "bonds" (Ephesians 6:20, Colossians 4:3; 4:18; Philippians 1:7, 13, 17); he names his fellow prisoners (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 23) he calls himself a prisoner (Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; Philemon 9): "Paul an old man, and now a prisoner". It was supposed by some that these letters were written during the two years' captivity at Cæsarea; but it is now generally acknowledged (by all who admit their authenticity) that they were written during the years immediately following in Rome, during the time that "Paul was suffered to dwell by himself, with a soldier that kept him . . . And he remained two whole years in his own hired lodging; and he received all that came in to him" (Acts 28:16-30). As St. Paul had appealed to the emperor, he was handed over, to await his trial, to the prefect of the Prætorian Guard, who was at that time probably the famous Burrhus, the friend of Seneca. He allowed the Apostle to live near the imperial palace in what was known as custodia militaris, his right wrist being connected day and night, by means of a chain, to the left arm of a soldier, who was relieved at regular intervals (Conybeare, Howson, Lewin). It was in such circumstances that these Epistles were written, some time between A.D. 61 and 63. It cannot be objected that there is no mention in them of the earthquake spoken of by Tacitus and Eusebius as having destroyed Laodicea; for there is no evidence that its effects reached Colossæ, and Eusebius fixes the date later than these letters. Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon were written and dispatched at one and the same time, while Philippians was composed at a somewhat different period of the captivity. The first three are an very closely connected. Tychicus is the messenger in Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 4:7-9. In the latter he is accompanied by Onesimus, in whose favour the Epistle to Philemon was written. In both Colossians and Philemon greetings are sent from Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas and there is the closest literary affinity between Ephesians and Colossians (see AUTHENTICITY OF THE EPISTLE below).

Readers addressed

Three cities are mentioned in Colossians, Colossæ (i, 2), Laodicea, and Hierapolis (iv, 13.) These were situated about 120 miles east from Ephesus in Phrygia, in Western Asia Minor, Colossæ and Laodicea being on the banks of the Lycus, a tributary of the Mæander. All three were within two or three hours'

walk from one another. Sir William Ramsay has shown that these towns lay altogether outside the routes followed by St. Paul in his missionary journeys; and it is inferred from Coloss., i, 4, 6, 7, 8 and ii, 1, that they were never visited by the Apostle himself. The great majority of the Colossian Christians appear to have been Gentile converts of Greek and Phrygian extraction (i, 26, 27; ii, 13), though it is probable that there was a small proportion of Jews living amongst them, as it is known that there were many scattered over the surrounding districts (Josephus, Ant., XII, iii, 4, and Lightfoot).

Why written

Colossians was written as a warning against certain false teachers, about whom St. Paul had probably heard from Epaphras, his "fellow-prisoner" and the founder of the Church of the Colossians. The most diverse opinions have been held regarding these seducers. They were called philosophers by Tertullian, Epicureans by St. Clement of Alexandria, Jews by Eichhorn, heathen followers of Pythagoras by Grotius. They have also been called Chaldean magicians, Judaizing Christians, Essenes, Ebionites, Cabbalists, Gnostics, or varying combinations of all these (see Jacquier, Histoire, I, 316; Cornely, Introduction, III, 514). The main outlines of their errors are, however, stated with sufficient clearness in the Epistle, which contains a two fold refutation of them: first, by a direct statement of the true doctrine on Christ, by which the very foundations of their erroneous teaching are shown to be baseless; and secondly, by a direct polemic in which is laid bare the hollowness of what they put forth under the specious name of "philosophy". Here, philosophy in general is not condemned, but only the philosophy of those false teachers (Hort, Jud. Chr., 118). This was not "according to Christ", but according to the "tradition of men", and was in keeping only with the very alphabet of worldly speculation (*kata ta stoicheia tou kosmou* — see Galatians 4:3). Josephus and Philo apply the word "philosophy" to Jewish teaching, and there can be no doubt that it was applied so in Coloss., ii; some of its details are given in 16-23: (1) The false teachers wished to introduce the observance of Sabbaths, new moons, and other such days. (2) They forbade the eating and drinking and even the very tasting and touching of certain things. (3) Under the false pretence of humility they inculcated the worship (*threskeia*) of angels, whom they regarded as equal or superior to Christ. The best modern commentators, Catholic and non-Catholic agree with St. Jerome that all these errors were of Jewish origin. The Essenes held the most exaggerated ideas on Sabbath observance and external purism, and they appear to have employed the names of the angels for magical purposes (Bel. Jud. II, vii, 2-13, Lightfoot, Col. and Dissertations). Many scholars are of opinion that the "elements of this world" (*stoicheia tou kosmou*) mean elemental spirits; as, at that time, many Jews held that all material things had special angels. In the Book of Henoch and the Book of Jubilees we read of angels of the stars, seasons

months, days of the year, heat, cold, frost, hail, winds, clouds etc. Abbott (Eph. and Coloss., p. 248) says that "the term properly used of the elements ruled by these spirits might readily be applied to the spirits themselves, especially as there was no other convenient term". At any rate angels play an important part in most of early apocryphal books of the Jews, e.g. in the two books just mentioned, the Book of the Secrets of Henoch, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, etc.

It may be noted in passing, that the words of the Epistle against the superstitious worship of angels cannot be taken as condemning the Catholic invocation of angels. Dr. T.K. Abbott, a candid non-Catholic scholar, has a very pertinent passage which bears on this point (Eph. and Coloss. p. 268): "Zonaras . . . says there was an ancient heresy of some who said that we should not call on Christ for help or access to God, but on the angels. . . . This latter view, however, would place Christ high above the angels, and therefore cannot have been that of Colossians, who required to be taught the superiority of Christ." The objection sometimes brought from a passage of Theodoret on the Council of Laodicea, is clearly and completely refuted by Estius (Comm. in Coloss., II, 18). Another difficulty may be mentioned in connection with this portion of the Epistle. The statement that the vain philosophy was in accordance with "the tradition of men" is not any disparagement of Apostolic traditions, of which St. Paul himself speaks as follows: "Therefore brethren, stand fast; and hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word or by our Epistle" (2 Thessalonians 2:14). "Now I praise you, brethren that in all things you are mindful of me: and keep my ordinances as I have delivered them to you" (1 Corinthians 11:2. — See also 2 Thessalonians 3:6; 1 Corinthians 7:17; 11:23; 14:33; 2 Corinthians 1:18; Galatians 1:8; Colossians 2:6, 7; 2 Timothy 1:13, 14; 2:2; 3:14; 2 John 1:12; 3 John 13). Finally, the very last verse, dealing with the errors (ii, 23) is considered one of the most difficult passages in the whole of the Scriptures. "Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in superstition and humility, and not sparing the body; not in any honour to the filling of the flesh." The last words of this verse have given rise to a multitude of the most conflicting interpretations. They have been taken as a condemnation of bodily mortification, and as an exhortation to it. Modern commentators devote much space to an enumeration of the many opinions and to an exhaustive study of these words without any satisfactory result. There can be little doubt that the opinion of Hort, Haupt, and Peake (Exp. Greek Test., 535) is the right one, viz. that the correct reading of this verse became irrevocably lost, in transcription, in very early times.

Contents

First part (1-2)

The Epistle consists of two parts the first two chapters being dogmatico-polemical and the last two practical or moral. In the first part the writer shows the absurdity of the errors by a direct statement of the supereminent dignity of Christ, by Whose blood we have the redemption of sins. He is the perfect image of the invisible God, begotten before all creatures. By Him and for Him were created all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, spiritual as well as material, and by Him are all things upheld. He is the Head of the Church and He has reconciled all things through the blood of His cross, and the Colossians "also he hath reconciled . . . through death". St. Paul, as the Apostle of the Gentiles and a prisoner for their sakes, exhorts them to hold fast to Christ in Whom the plenitude of the Godhead dwells, and not to allow themselves under the plausible name of philosophy, to be re-enslaved by Jewish traditions based on the Law of Moses, which was but the shadow of which Christ was the reality and which was abrogated by His coming. They are not to listen to vain and rudimentary speculations of the false teachers, nor are they to suffer themselves to be deluded by a specious plea of humility to put angels or demons on a level with Christ, the creator of all, the master of angels, and conqueror of demons.

Second part (3-4)

In this portion of the Epistle St. Paul draws some practical lessons from the foregoing teaching. He appeals to them that as they are risen with Christ they should mind the things that are above; put off the old man and put on the new. In Christ there is to be neither Gentile nor Jew, barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free. The duties of wives and husbands, children and servants are next given. He recommends constant prayer and thanksgiving, and tells them to walk with wisdom towards them that are without, letting their speech be always in grace seasoned with salt, that they may know how to answer every man. After the final greeting the Apostle ends with: "The salutation of Paul with my own hand. Be mindful of my bands. Grace be with you. Amen".

Authenticity of the epistle

External evidence

The external evidence for the Epistle is so strong that even Davidson has gone to the extent of saying that "it was unanimously attested in ancient times". Considering its brevity, controversial character, and the local and ephemeral nature of the errors dealt with, it is surprising how frequently it was used by early writers. There are traces of it in some of the Apostolic Fathers and it was known to the writer of the Epistle of Barnabas, to St. Polycarp, and Theophilus of Antioch. It was quoted by Justin Martyr, Irenæus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, etc. From the Muratorian Fragment and early versions it is evident that it was contained in the very first collections of St. Paul's Epistles. It was

used as Scripture early in the second century, by Marcion, the Valentinians, and by other heretics mentioned in the "Philosophoumena"; and they would not have accepted it had it originated among their opponents after they broke away from the Church.

Internal evidence

The Epistle claims to have been written by St. Paul, and the internal evidence shows close connection with Philippians (von Soden) and Philemon, which are admitted to be genuine letters of St. Paul. Renan concedes that it presents several traits which are opposed to the hypothesis of its being a forgery, and of this number is its connection with the Epistle to Philemon. It has to be noted, too, that the moral portion of the Epistle, consisting of the last two chapters has the closest affinity with similar portions of other Epistles, while the whole admirably fits in with the known details of St. Paul's life, and throws considerable light upon them.

Objections

As the historical evidence is much stronger than that for the majority of classical writings, it may be asked why its genuineness was ever called in question. It was never doubted until 1838, when Meyerhoff, followed by others, began to raise objections against it. It will be convenient to deal with these objections under the following four heads: (1) Style; (2) Christology; (3) Errors dealt with; and (4) Similarity to Ephesians.

Style

(a) In general, on comparing the Epistle with Corinthians, Romans, and Galatians, it will be seen that the style, especially in the earlier part, is heavy and complicated. It contains no sudden questions, no crushing dilemmas, no vehement outbursts of sweeping Pauline eloquence. Some of the sentences are long and involved, and though the whole is set forth in a lofty and noble strain, the presentment is uniform and not quite in the manner, say, of Galatians. Hence it is objected that it could not have been written by St. Paul. But all this can be very naturally explained when it is borne in mind that the Epistle was written after several years of monotonous confinement, when Christianity had taken firm root, when the old type of Judaizer had become extinct and St. Paul's position securely established. His advancing years also should be taken into account. It is unfair, moreover, to compare this Epistle, or but parts of it, with only certain portions of one or two of the earlier ones. There are long and involved sentences scattered throughout Romans, I and II Corinthians, and Galatians, and the generally admitted Epistle to the Philippians. It has also to be observed that many of the old Pauline expressions and methods of reasoning are

most naturally and inextricably interwoven with the very tissue and substance of the Epistle. Ample proofs for all these statements and others throughout this article, are given in works mentioned in the bibliography. Dr. Sanday has voiced the opinion of fair-minded critics when he says that nobody can view the Epistle as a whole, without being impressed by its unbreakable unity and genuine Pauline character.

(b) Many of St. Paul's favourite expressions are wanting. From eight to a dozen words not unfrequently used by him in earlier writings are absent from this short Epistle and about a dozen connecting particles, which he employs elsewhere, are also missing. One or two instances will show how such objections may readily be solved, with the aid of a concordance. The words *dikaïos*, *soteria* and *soteria* are not found in the Epistle. Therefore, etc. — But *dikaïos* is wanting both in I Cor. and I Thess.; *nomos* is not contained either in I Cor. or Gal.; *nomos* is not found at all in I Thess. or II Cor. In the same way (with regard to connecting particles) *ara*, which is not in this Epistle, is not found either in Philipp. or the first hundred verses of 1 Corinthians, a space much longer than the whole of the Epistle; *ara oun*, which is frequent in Romans, is not met with in I and II Cor. and only once in Gal. (See the details of the argument in Abbott and Jacquier.)

(c) It is objected that the Epistle contains many strange words, nowhere else used by St. Paul. That, however, is precisely what we should expect in an Epistle of St. Paul. Every Epistle written by him contains many words employed by him nowhere else. Alford gives a list of thirty-two *apax legomena* in this Epistle, and of these eighteen occur in the second chapter, where the errors are dealt with. The same thing occurs in the earlier Epistles, where the Apostle is speaking of new subjects or peculiar errors, and there *apax legomena* most abound. This Epistle does not show more than the ordinary proportion of new words and in this respect compares favourably with the genuine II Cor. Furthermore, the compound words found in the Epistle have their analogues in similar passages of the authentic Epistle to the Romans. It would be most absurd to bind down to a narrow and set vocabulary a writer of such intellectual vigour and literary versatility as St. Paul. The vocabulary of all writers changes with time, place, and subject-matter. Salmon, Mahaffy, and others have pointed out that similar changes of vocabulary occur in the writings of Xenophon, who was a traveller like St. Paul. Compare the earlier and later letters of Lord Acton (edited by Abbot Gasquet) or of Cardinal Newman.

Christology

It has objected that the exalted idea of Christ presented in the Epistle could not have been written by St. Paul. In answer to this it will be sufficient to quote the

following passage from the genuine Epistle to the Philippians: "Who [Christ Jesus] being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (2:6, 7, etc. See Romans 1:3-4; Greek text, 8:3; 1 Corinthians 7:6; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Galatians 4:6, etc.). That the Christology of the Epistle does not differ in any essential point from that of St. Paul's other Epistles is seen from an impartial study of these latter. The subject has been scientifically worked out by Père Rose (Rev. bibl. 1903), M. Lépin (Jésus Messie, 341), Sanday (Criticism of the Fourth Gospel, lect. vii, Oxford, 1905), Knowling (The Testimony of St. Paul to Christ, London, 1905), Lacey (The Historic Christ, London 1905), etc. Nor can the words (i, 24): I . . . "fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ in my flesh, for his body, which is the church", present any difficulty when it is remembered that he had just said that Christ had reconciled all through the blood of His cross, and that the correct meaning of *antanaplero ta hystere mata ton thlipseon tou Christou en te sarki mou hyper tou somatos autou, ho estin he ekklesia* is: "I am filling up those Christian sufferings that remain for me to endure for the sake of the Church of Christ", etc. Compare 2 Corinthians 1:5, "For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us" (*ta pathemata tou Christou*).

Errors dealt with

The objection under this heading need not detain us long. Some years ago it was frequently asserted that the errors combated in this Epistle were Gnostic errors of the second century, and that the Epistle was therefore written many years after St. Paul's death. But this opinion is now considered, even by the most advanced critics, as exploded and antiquated. Nobody can read the writings of these Gnostics without becoming convinced that terms employed by them were used in a quite different sense from that attached to them in the Epistle. Baur himself appears to have had considerable misgivings on the point. The errors of Judaic Gnosticism, condemned in the Epistle, were quite embryonic when compared with the full-blown Greek Gnosticism of the second century (see Lightfoot, Coloss., etc.).

Similarity to Ephesians

The principal objection to the Epistle is its great similarity to Ephesians. Davidson stated that out of 155 verses in the latter Epistle 78 were identical with Colossians. De Wette held that Ephesians was but a verbose amplification of Colossians. Baur thought Ephesians the superior letter, and Renan asked how can we suppose the Apostle spending his time in making a bald transcription of himself. But as Dr. Salmon pointed out, an Apostle might write a circular letter, that is, he might send to different places letters couched in identical words. Many theories have been elaborated to explain these undoubted

resemblances. Ewald maintained that the substance was St. Paul's, while the composition was left to Timothy. Weiss and Hitzig had recourse to a theory of interpolations. But the theory that has gained the greatest amount of notoriety is that of H.J. Holtzmann. In his "Kritik der Epheser- und Kolosser-Briefe" (1872) he instituted a most elaborate and exhaustive comparison between the two Epistles. He took a number of passages which seemed to prove the priority of Ephesians and an equal number which were just as conclusive that Colossians was the earlier. The natural conclusion would be that all these similarities were due to the same author writing and dispatching these Epistles at one and the same time. But Holtzmann's explanation was quite different. He supposed that St. Paul wrote a short epistle to the Colossians. From the study of this epistle a later writer composed the Epistle to the Ephesians. Then taking St. Paul's short Epistle to the Colossians he made interpolations and additions to it from his own composition to the Ephesians and thus built up our present Epistle to the Ephesians, and that with such success that the thing was never suspected until the nineteenth century. This intricate and complicated theory did not gain a single adherent, even amongst the most advanced critical school. Hilgenfeld rejected it in 1873; but its best refutation is von Soden's detailed criticism of 1885. He held that only about eight verses could be regarded as interpolations. Sanday in Smith's "Dict. of the Bible" (I, 625) pointed out that von Soden's lines of demarcation were purely imaginary, and Pfleiderer showed the inconsistency involved in his rejection of these verses. The results of these criticisms and of further study convinced von Soden, in 1891, that the whole Epistle was genuine, with the exception of a single verse — a verse now generally held to be genuine. In 1894 Jülicher stated that the best solution was to admit the authenticity of both Epistles, though he speaks more hesitatingly in "Encyc. Bibl." 1889. J. Weiss made an abortive attempt to resuscitate Holtzmann's moribund theory in 1900.

Whilst Holtzmann's facts are incontestable, and only go to prove the community of authorship, his explanation (in which he seems to have lost faith) is rejected by scholars as artificial and unreal. It affords no explanation of many things connected with these Epistles. It does not explain how the early Christians allowed a genuine letter of St. Paul to become completely lost without trace or mention, for the sake of two forgeries of much later date. Each Epistle, taken by itself, shows such unity and connection of argument and language, that if the other were not in existence no one would have suspected the slightest degree of interpolation. The parts rejected as interpolations break the unity of argument and flow of ideas. Why should a forger, capable of writing the bulk of both Epistles, take the trouble to interpolate verses and half of his own production from one Epistle into the other, and that in quite a different connection? Besides, as Principal Salmond observes, there is not a dull sameness of style in both Epistles. Ephesians is round, full, rhythmical; Colossians more pointed,

logical and concise. Ephesians has several references to the Old Testament; Colossians only one. There are different new words in each, and there are whole passages in the one and nothing like them found in the other.

The expressions supposed to have come from Colossians occur quite naturally in Ephesians, but by no means in the same context and connection, and vice versa. As Holtzmann's hypothesis has completely broken down, his study of the Epistles shows such close relationship between them that there can be only one other possible explanation: that both are the genuine writings of one man, and that man was St. Paul. Paley, who wrote his "Horæ Paulinæ" in 1790, set forth this side of the argument long before these objections were thought of; and the fact that he can still be quoted, without qualification, in this connection, is the best proof of the futility of all such objections. He says (*Horæ Paulinæ*, London, 1790, 215):

Whoever writes two letters or discourses nearly upon the same subject and at no great distance of time but without any express recollection of what he had written before will find himself repeating some sentences in the very order of the words in which he had already used them; but he will more frequently find himself employing some principal terms, with the order inadvertently changed, or with the order disturbed by the intermixture of other words and phrases expressive of ideas rising up at the time, or in many instances repeating not single words, nor yet whole sentences, but parts and fragments of sentences. Of all these varieties the examination of our two epistles will furnish plain examples, and I should rely on this class of instances more than on the last, because although an impostor might transcribe into a forgery entire sentences and phrases, yet the dislocation of words, the partial recollection of phrases and sentences, the intermixture of new terms and new ideas with terms and ideas before used, which will appear in the examples that follow, and which are the natural products of writing produced under the circumstances in which these epistles are represented to have been composed — would not, I think, have occurred to the invention of a forger, nor, if they had occurred would they have been so easily executed. This studied variation was a refinement in forgery which I believe did not exist, or if we can suppose it to have been practised in the instances adduced below, why, it may be asked, was not the same art exercised upon those which we have collected in the preceding class?

He then goes on to illustrate all these points by numerous examples taken from all parts of these Epistles.