

INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

by

Edwin C. Dargan
D.D.

Note: Author's introduction in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1890). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

I. THE AUTHOR

The opening words of the Epistle itself declare it to be the production of Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Is there any good reason to doubt this claim? None whatever, as will appear from the following considerations:

1. The external authority is ample and satisfactory. Schaff, in his *Church History* (latest edition, page 785), says: "The external testimonies are unanimous in favor of the Pauline authorship, and go as far back as Justin Martyr, Polycarp, Ignatius, and the heretical Marcion." Meyer ("Einleitung," section 3) puts it thus: "The external testimony for our Epistle is so ancient and continuous and universal (Marcion; Valentinus' School; Irenæus, "Adv. Haeret," 3, 14, 1 and 5, 14.2; Muratorian Canon; Clement of Alexandria, "Strom." I. page 277; IV. page 499; V. page 576; VI. page 645; Tertullian, "De Praescrip. Haeret." 7. "De Resur." 23; Origen, "Cont. Cels." 5,8, etc.) that from this side a well-grounded doubt cannot be raised." We have then the statement of the Epistle itself confirmed by the unvarying testimony of ancient writers, and the unbroken tradition of history for centuries. This ought to be enough.
2. The objections from internal considerations have not been sustained. It is surely a daring thing to challenge, from internal considerations, the authorship of any writing which is as amply sustained as this is by external evidence. But German criticism, whatever else may be said of it, is at least daring; and so has ventured to challenge the Pauline authorship wholly from the character, contents, and style of the Epistle itself. These objections have been elaborately and satisfactorily answered by Olshausen and Meyer in their Introduction to the Epistle, and by Farrar in his *Life and Work of St. Paul* (ch. XLVIII). It is hardly worthwhile here to state and refute these objections. Those who feel interested may consult the authorities above referred to, and Schaff's *Church History*, Vol. I, page 782, seq.
3. If Paul did not write it, who did? It must have been written by someone. Negative criticism wrestles in vain with the problem that itself has raised. As Farrar well says: "We might well be amazed if the first hundred years after the death of Christ produced a totally unknown writer who, assuming the name of Paul, treats the mystery which it was given him to reveal with a masterly power which the apostle himself rarely equaled, and most certainly never surpassed. Let any one study the remains of the Apostolic Fathers, and he may well be surprised at the facility with which writers of the Tübingen School, and their successors, assume the existence of Pauls who lived unheard of and died unknown, though they were intellectually and spiritually the equals if not the

superiors of St. Paul himself."

II. THE RECIPIENTS

The Epistle is addressed "to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse."

1. The town of Colosse was situated on the river Lycus, a tributary of the Maeander. Its near neighbors were Laodicea and Hierapolis, some twelve miles away. Colosse was never so large or wealthy as either of the other cities. It is mentioned by Herodotus as a resting place for Xerxes' great invading host, and by Xenophon in his account of the expedition of Cyrus the Younger. These writers speak favorably of the city. But later on its two neighbors overshadowed it, and after the apostolic age it fell into a decline. It was visited by an earthquake probably near this time, and that catastrophe, from which its neighbors recovered, may have facilitated the decline of the least important of the three. Near its site, in the Middle Ages, a small village called Choræ existed, but the actual ruins of Colosse have been identified only within recent times.

2. The church at Colosse does not seem to have been founded or even visited by Paul. We infer from his language in 2:1 that he did not personally know most of the members either there or at Laodicea, though it is equally evident from other allusions that he knew some at both places. It appears reasonable to conclude from his language about Epaphras (1:7,8; 4:12) that this "faithful minister" was the probable founder and pastor of the church. It may also not unreasonably be conjectured that Epaphras was himself a convert of Paul, and that the churches at Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were the outgrowth of the apostle's long and fruitful labors at Ephesus, the chief city of all this region (see Acts 19:10,26). The church does not figure largely in subsequent history, though its neighbor Laodicea was one of the "Seven" addressed in Revelation. The Colossian Church probably declined in importance with the town, and was the least important of all the churches to which Paul addressed a letter.

III. DATE AND PLACE

The Epistle was evidently written during a captivity of the apostle (see Col. 4:10, 13 and Philem. 1, 23). Which captivity was it? There are known to have been two of these, and a third is very reasonably supposed; namely, (1) the captivity at Cesarea under Felix and Festus; (2) the captivity at Rome, subsequent to the voyage and extending (Acts 28:30) over "two whole years"; (3) a second and later captivity at Rome terminated by his death, and during which he wrote the Pastoral Epistles. This, though not historically established, is generally accepted as necessary to explain certain allusions in the later letters. No one holds that the letter to Colosse was written during this last confinement. The question lies, therefore, between the captivity at Cesarea and the first Roman captivity. Some of the ablest expositors, even Meyer, maintain that the letter was written from Cesarea. But the grounds for this opinion are very slender. Tradition unanimously designates Rome, and the allusions in Colossians and the other Epistles of this period strongly endorse this view. The case is well stated by Farrar (ch. XLVI). The date, of course, cannot be exactly settled, but it was most likely about the year 60.

IV. DESIGN

Although not known by face to the Colossian Church, Paul had a deep interest in them, as in all the churches. And this interest was evidently intensified by the coming of Epaphras (1:7) with news

concerning the character and dangers of the Colossian Church. It has also been suggested that Paul had learned something of the state of things at Colosse from Onesimus, the escaped slave of Philemon, who was probably a member of the Colossian Church. From these sources, then, Paul learned of a dangerous heresy, or tendency of thought, that was threatening the churches of this region--Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse. He sympathized with Epaphras (1:9; 2:1; 4:12,13) in his deep concern for their welfare, especially in view of their present danger. Moved by this feeling, and no doubt at the earnest request of Epaphras, he writes this letter together with one to Laodicea (4:16) to refute the incipient heresy and to set forth the truth of the gospel over against these threatening errors.

The general outline of this error may be traced in the allusions of the Epistle itself, its more particular historical and philosophic affinities from what is known of certain sects and tendencies of the time. A study of the Epistle shows that there are two distinct elements of error which the apostle combats: (1) A Judaistic tendency--a regard for new moons and Sabbaths and holy days; and (2) a Gnostic tendency--a would-be philosophic speculation about the unseen world, combined with ascetic practices. The question has been raised whether these two lines of error were held by one or two different parties. But it seems wholly unnecessary to assume the existence of two parties of errorists. It is better, with Meyer, Lightfoot, and other eminent scholars, to hold that we have in the views combatted by Paul a combination of Judaic and Gnostic elements. For it is impossible to separate clearly the lines of attack, supposing there were two distinct sets of wrong teachers. After warning them in 2:8 against "philosophy and vain deceit" he proceeds to discuss the spiritual circumcision and the law of ordinances. And in 2:16, speaking of the fast days and new moons, he goes on at once in verses 18 and 19 to allude to the empty speculations of the errorists. Thus it would seem to be plain that it was one set of false teachers, but that they held views at once Judaic and Gnostic.

Two explanations of this rather singular phenomenon are offered: (1) Lightfoot and Meyer, with others, hold that the views and practices of the Essenes, so far as they are known, presented just this combination of Judaism and Gnosticism, both in its speculative elements and its ascetic practices, which we find traced in the Epistle. (2) Franke, however, denies on various grounds the relation to the Essenes and explains the compound with the general statement that Judaism, especially in the Dispersion, had doubtless felt the influence of the incipient Gnosticism of the day. Either explanation is an *explanation*, but the able and learned discussions of Lightfoot give very great probability to his view. In either case, whether Essenes or not, these false teachers were by their wretched medley of Judaism and Gnosticism seriously endangering the purity of Christian teaching, if not the very existence of Christian churches at Colosse, Hierapolis, and Laodicea. It was to meet and repel these teachers, therefore, that the letters to Colosse and Laodicea were written and directed (4:16) to be interchanged.

1. With regard to the form of Judaism opposed in the Epistle, not much need be said. It differed somewhat from that against which the Epistle to the Galatians had been directed, and to which allusion is made in Philippians. That was narrower, took more account of obedience to the law and submission to circumcision as necessary to salvation. There are allusions to the same things in Colossians, but the scope is broader. To show the similarity, or rather the sameness of the error, however, let Galatians and Colossians be compared -- Gal. 5:2,3,6; 6:15 with Col. 2:11 with regard to circumcision; Gal. 2:15-21; 3:1-14 with Col. 2:13,14 with regard to the law; Gal. 4:10 with Col. 2:16 with regard to feasts; and finally, Gal. 3:28 with Col. 3:11 with regard to exclusiveness. These passages compared will show both the sameness of the error and the wide difference in the

treatment. If Lightfoot's theory about the Essenes be accepted, we might say that in Galatians Paul combats Pharisaic Judaism, in Colossians Essenic Judaism.

2. Any elaborate discussion of Gnosticism is, of course, here impracticable. Three things however, must be remarked: (1) That Gnosticism in the age immediately following the Apostolic, and even later, assumed great proportions; became a wonderfully [surprisingly] complete and developed system; but that amid all these complexities and additions the simpler elements of an earlier stage of history may be traced. (2) That there is very strong reason to believe that this earlier form of thought and speculation, afterward called Gnosticism, powerfully affected the Jews, whether particularly the Essenes or the general body, about the time in which Colossians was written. (3) That therefore we may expect to find in Colossians allusions only to the earliest stage, and yet to the fundamental principles, of Gnosticism. This is in fact the case.

What then was Gnosticism? The word comes from the Greek for "knowledge" (γνώσις). And so the term itself claims for the Gnostic, or "knowing one," that he has superior "knowledge" concerning things beyond the range of common observation and experience. We see traces of this claim in the allusions to the disturbers at Colosse in such passages as Col. 2:8,18,23, besides the teaching that *all* should be instructed in the *knowledge* of the gospel, and similar expressions.

This superior "knowledge" occupied itself with two deep and difficult questions: (1) The mode of creation and (2) the origin of evil. In its later forms Gnosticism had many a wild and fantastic doctrine on these matters. But even in the earliest traces of it noticed in our Epistle we can discover this leading thought. Paul opposes to all baseless and fantastical ideas of creation the great truth that in Christ all things were created and continue to exist (1:16,17); that in him the fullness (πλήρωμα, "plentitude," a favorite word with the Gnostics) of the Divine Being dwells (2:9). The Gnostics held that matter was the seat of all evils, was itself an evil; and this led them at first to those ascetic observances which are noticed and condemned in the latter part of the second chapter of our Epistle. Again, the Gnostic held to *emanations* from Deity, which resulted in an order of things and beings between God and man. To this idea allusion is made in the worshiping of angels and humility mentioned in 2:18.

We thus see that the design of the apostle in writing this letter was to refute the double form of heresy that lay in a dangerous compound of Judaism and the Gnostic speculations then arising.

V. CHARACTER AND CONTENTS

1. The Epistle to the Colossians differs from the other writings of Paul both in style and matter, more closely resembling Ephesians than any other. Yet the thought and language are both in harmony with the other epistles, the differences being only such as would be natural to the same writer when writing under different circumstances and for somewhat different purposes. There are in Colossians several passages where the language is rough and the meaning obscure. Dr. Hort conjectures that this is due to an early corruption of text. But this is unnecessary. The obscurity may be due to other causes. Others--"advanced critics"--infer that Paul did not write Colossians. But this is, as Meyer says, "much too rash." Any man's style is likely to vary in different writings. And the likenesses to Paul's other writings are so great and numerous that they only serve to emphasize the differences. A forger would have been likely to produce a much more clever imitation, if he wished to succeed. But no forger could have expressed such thought as is here.

The trick of style may be caught, but the live personality no man can steal. The great Apostle to the Gentiles lives and moves in every passage of this short but characteristic letter. It is vigorous in method, elevated in thought, profound in conception, clear in doctrine, warm in feeling--in a word, Paul's throughout.

2. The course of thought in the Epistle may be exhibited briefly as follows:

(1:1,2) -- In the opening salutation he declares his apostolic authority, associates Timothy with him, and greets the church at Colosse with the Apostolic Benediction.

(1:3-8) -- He expresses his gratitude to God, and his prayerful interest in them, because of the common treasure of the gospel which has been widely preached and is fruitful.

(1:9-23) -- He more particularly states the burden of his prayer for them: (1) that they should grow in wisdom and grace; (2) that they should be thankful to God for his saving grace in Christ; and this leads him (3) to set forth the preeminent glory of Christ as the Image of God, the Firstborn, the creative Power, the Head of the Church, the Saviour; and (4) to speak of their own reconciliation to God and ultimate salvation by the gospel.

(1:24-29) -- He is glad to suffer in this cause, (1) even filling up any lack in Christ's sufferings, in (2) carrying on his work as minister of the mystery of God's will, and (3) while preaching and warning all to accept the salvation in Christ.

(2:1-7) -- He tells of his deep interest in them and their brethren at Laodicea: (1) that the full blessing of the gospel knowledge might be theirs; (2) that they might not be led astray; (3) for though absent he rejoiced to be present with them in spirit; and so (4) he earnestly exhorts them to hold fast to Christ as they had been taught.

(2:8-23) -- He is led now to warn them against the errors that he had heard were threatening them; namely, worldly rudiments and not the knowledge of Christ, in whom dwells the plenitude of divine excellence. This error appears in three forms: (1) legalism, 11-17; (2) false philosophy, 18,19; (3) asceticism, 20-23.

(3:1-17) -- He now gives the true moral and spiritual principle, the antidote to all error in thought and practice, that is, heavenly-mindedness in Christ. And so he urges (1) the putting down of all low affections and wicked practices and (2) the putting on of all elevated affections and good practices.

(3:18-4:1) -- Domestic relations are then considered and the morals of the home-life enforced in the appropriate duties of wives, husbands, children, fathers, servants, masters.

(4:2-6) -- Exhortation (1) to prayer in general and particularly for himself in his work, and (2) to wisdom in demeanor toward those who are not believers.

(4:7-18) -- Personal matters occupy the rest of the letter: (1) how they should hear of his affairs; (2) salutations to and from different individuals; (3) his autograph salutation at the close.

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