

TO WHOM WAS "EPHESIANS" WRITTEN?

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Marcion, who about the year 140 A.D. made a collection of Christian writings, designated the epistle we call "Ephesians" as a letter to the Laodiceans, mentioned in Col. 2:1; 4:13, 15 f. Harnack¹ has recently defended Marcion's testimony on the ground that it is the oldest extant tradition, and, further, because Paul's special interest in the Laodiceans appears from his mention of them three times in the Colossian letter. Marcion has had a small following, particularly among the older German critics,² but Harnack, in reviving the hypothesis, supplements it with an explanation of how the Laodiceans' name came to be removed from the letter. It appears from Rev. 3:14 ff. that the church in Laodicea fell into bad repute: "Because thou art lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth." Hence probably their name was expunged from the epistle, and, since no one ventured for some time to insert another name, the best texts remain defective at this point.

It may be of interest to place Harnack's suggestion into relation with current opinion upon the problem of the destination of our so-called "Ephesians"; and especially since Harnack's article seems to have appeared too late for Moffatt to note it in his recent *Introduction* except in the Bibliography.

There are two main reasons usually urged against supposing this letter to have been intended for the church at Ephesus, namely: (1)

¹ "Die Adresse des Epheserbriefes des Paulus" in *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich-preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, XXXVII (1910), 696-709.

² Cf. H. J. Holtzmann, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (1892), 257. More recently, Deissmann not only thinks the letter written to Laodicea but that it was sent while Paul was in prison in Ephesus, *Licht vom Osten* (1908), 165. B. W. Robinson offers the same opinion in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, XXIX (1910), 181 ff. So also Westberg, *Zur neutestamentlichen Chronologie* (1911), 84 ff. To be sure, many scholars have held Laodicea to be one of the places for which the letter was intended.

the inadequate attestation for "at Ephesus" (*ἐν Ἐφέσῳ*) in vs. 1; and (2) the absence of local color throughout the epistle. In two of the oldest manuscripts, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, *ἐν Ἐφέσῳ* did not stand in the original copy. Basil, a church Father of the fourth century, did not find it in the oldest of the copies (*ἐν τοῖς παλαιαῖς τῶν ἀντιγράφων, Contra Eunom., ii, 19*). Still earlier Origen interpreted the passage without this phrase, and the same form of text appears to have been known to several later interpreters. Not even Tertullian seems to have read *ἐν Ἐφέσῳ* in the salutation, although he emphatically claimed the epistle for Ephesus: "We have it on the true tradition of the church that this epistle was sent to the Ephesians, not to the Laodiceans. Marcion, however, was very desirous of giving it the new title"—he does not accuse Marcion of corrupting the text but only changing the title—"as if he were extremely accurate in investigating such a point." And then as if to dismiss a problem which could not be absolutely proved: "But of what consequence are the titles since in writing to a certain church the Apostle did in fact write to all" (*Adv. Marcion, v, 17*). Although the church generally said the letter was addressed to Ephesus,³ probably this opinion did not start from the presence of *ἐν Ἐφέσῳ* in the text. It would be interesting to know just what effect Marcion's choice of Laodicea may have had upon his orthodox opponents in confirming them in their choice of Ephesus.

The difficulty of supposing this to be a letter to a church which Paul had personally founded, and with which he had spent more than two years, was early recognized even by those who read *ἐν Ἐφέσῳ* in the text. To make the date of writing fall before Paul's visit to Ephesus was an impossible hypothesis even in an uncritical age.⁴ Theories which connected the letter immediately with the Ephesian church, but more especially with some particular part of that church, or with some community in the vicinity,⁵ were intrinsically more plausible, but they have now been generally dis-

³ So the Muratorian Canon, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, *et al.*, and the title in all manuscripts.

⁴ Cf. B. Weiss, *New Testament Introduction*, I, 339, n. 1.

⁵ E.g., Paul was thinking of readers converted after he left Ephesus (Neudecker), or of a lately established church in the neighborhood (Lünemann), or of Ephesus, and other Asian churches (Beza, Grotius, Credner, Neander, Ellicott, *et al.*).

carded as unsatisfactory expedients. Nothing in the epistle indicates that the Apostle distinguishes between readers who are personally acquainted with him and those who are not; they are all assumed to be interested in his welfare (3:1, 13; 6:19-22) as he is in theirs (1:13, 15 ff.; 3:14 ff.), yet he can scarcely have had the Ephesians in mind when he questioned whether his readers had heard of the dispensation of the grace of God given him toward them as gentiles (3:2), or when he lacked positive knowledge of the quality of instruction they had received (4:21). Nor is he likely to have spoken of "having heard" of the Ephesians' faith and love (1:15), or to have closed with so brief and impersonal a farewell to a community where he must have left behind a host of friends.⁶ Consequently the hypothesis of a circular letter, originally having no connection with Ephesus, has held the field in recent years.⁷ As several churches were to read it in turn, no congregation was mentioned in the address; or else some obscure name, or names, early disappeared from the original. Ultimately Ephesus, the chief church of Asia, the probable place where the letter was early preserved and from which it was first circulated, gave its own name to the epistle. Notwithstanding the wide acceptance of this view at present it does not satisfactorily explain certain difficulties, the seriousness of which seems to be overlooked. Taking first that form of the hypothesis which omits any geographical designation in the original, there arises at once the problem of interpreting Paul's language: "the saints who are and faithful" (*τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν καὶ πιστοῖς*). Usher's suggestion of a blank after "who are," to be filled in by the reader in different localities, makes it possible to understand the present text, but the theory has been quite generally discarded as too "modern." Merely as curiosities of interpretation we may cite Origen and Basil. The former rendered the clause as "the saints, those who are," that is, as God is called the "I am" in Exodus, so Christians are here called those "who are." Basil, in a more philosophical

⁶ Rom., chap. 16, sometimes regarded as a note to Ephesus, stands in sharp contrast with the ending of Ephesians.

⁷ Among adherents of this view one may mention B. Weiss, Zahn, Jülicher, Gregory, Lightfoot, T. K. Abbott, W. Lock, Godet, Bacon, McGiffert. Moffatt holds essentially the same view though he denies the letter to Paul.

vein, explained that Christians are here called those "who are" because they have true "being" by their union through knowledge with Christ who "is." The more recent explanations are scarcely more successful. Bengel took *τοῖς οὖσιν* absolutely, "those who are present" wherever Tychicus happened to carry the letter (cf. Acts 13:1, *κατὰ τὴν οὐσαν ἐκκλησίαν*=in the church that was *there*). Schneckenburger rendered "who are truly saints" (taking *οὖσιν* as equivalent to *ὁντως*). T. K. Abbott, in the *International Critical Commentary*, gives *καί* the meaning of also, "the saints who are also faithful."

All these interpretations seem unduly forced. Paul knows how to express himself clearly when he wishes to address one letter to several churches (II Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1), and surely he would have been more explicit here had he designed this for a circular letter whether to the churches of Asia in general or to specific congregations in Asia. It was his custom in other epistles to determine "those who are" more exactly (Rom. 1:7; II Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; cf. Col. 1:1). Moreover, the personal note at the close of the letter (6:21 f.), the commendation of the readers for showing love for the saints, and Paul's remembrance of them in his prayers (1:15 f.; 3:14) are indications of a definite community in the thought of the writer. These features of the letter call for the mention of a particular locality (or localities) in the address. Nor is this a modern conviction only; it was also the feeling of the early copyists who brought the reference to Ephesus from the title into the text.

Two alternatives are left; either the original designation has been accidentally lost, or it has been deliberately expunged. P. Ewald's reconstruction of the text⁸ to read "those who are beloved and faithful" still leaves the salutation hanging in the air. Where do these persons reside? is the problem still. One easily thinks of "those who are in Asia" (*τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ*; cf. II Cor. 1:1, *τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Ἀχαΐᾳ*) as an appropriate reading, but it lacks any textual support. In fact, accidental loss of any term is doubtful in view of the relatively early and wide use of this

⁸ *Die Briefe des Paulus an die Epheser, etc.*, in Zahn's *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (1905), 15 f., 61.

epistle. Its influence upon the apostolic Fathers, as well as upon some New Testament writers, is very pronounced.⁹

On the other hand, a deliberate elimination of the original local designation has seldom been considered probable, since there seemed to be no sufficient motive for the act. It is too modern to assume that the lack of local color in the letter caused the removal of ἐν Ἐφέσῳ at a very early date. But is there any good reason for supposing that an original ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ might have been suppressed? This is the point at which Harnack's suggestion is especially helpful. Of the seven churches addressed in Rev., chaps. 2 and 3, Laodicea is the last and most severely criticized. If the exhortation to repent was not heeded (Rev. 3:19), the failure would be looked upon as an act of open disobedience to the Spirit, and the removal of the Laodiceans' name from all the records would doubtless seem to the faithful as a pious act in obedience to the Spirit's will. That the Ephesian church took the lead in this matter and rescued the Laodicean epistle from the condemnation pronounced upon the church is easily imaginable. Ephesus itself is not severely rebuked in Revelation, for it had already, through hatred of the Nicolaitans, established itself as the champion of orthodoxy (2:2, 6). But it is not strange that Marcion, himself a wealthy ship-owner from Sinope, should have been less severe in condemning the Laodicean church for its possession of much wealth. Moreover, he too had recently been placed under the ban by

⁹ For verbal resemblances between Clement of Rome and Ephesians compare, respectively, 19:2 with 2:7; 23:2 with 4:8; 27:5 with 1:19 and 6:10; 32:3-5 with 2:8-10; 36:2 with 1:17 f. and 5:7; 38:1 with 5:21; 46:6 with 4:4-7; 46:7 with 4:25; 57:1 with 3:14; 61:3 with 3:20; 64:1 with 1:4. Between Ignatius and Ephesians compare, respectively, *Mag.* 7:1 with 4:3-6; *Phil.* 2:1 with 5:8; *Polyc.* 5:1 and 6:2 with 5:25, 29 and 6:11; *Eph.* Salut. with 1:19 and 4:13; also *Eph.* 4:2, 5:1, and 9:1 with 5:30, 5:1, and 2:22. Polycarp, *Phil.* 1:2; 10:2; 12:1, 3 = *Eph.* 2:8 f.; 5:21; 4:26; 6:18. Hermas, *Mand.* x, 2, 5 and *Sim.* ix, 13, 5 = *Eph.* 4:30 and 4:4. Direct references to this epistle are made by Irenaeus, *Haer.* v, 2, 3 and 14, 3; Clement A., *Paed.* i, 5, and *Strom.* iv, 8; Origen, *De princ.* iii, 5, 4; and all regard it a letter to Ephesus though probably on traditional rather than on textual grounds. Valentinus (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1, 3, 1) quotes Eph. 3:21 as a saying of Paul, and the letter is in Marcion's canon. For the influence of Ephesians on I Peter (assuming this to be the chronological order), with I Peter 1:2; 1:12; 2:4; 2:18-3:7; 3:19; 3:22 compare, respectively, Eph. 1:3 ff.; 3:10; 2:20; 5:22-6:9; 4:9; 1:20. A whole set of ideas characteristic of Ephesians is contained in John, chap. 17.

orthodoxy, and it is conceivable that he and the Laodiceans may to some extent have shared similar heretical views; but he is not likely to have assigned a letter to this church on purely dogmatic grounds, nor is it probable he would have gone contrary to the current tradition merely because a Laodicean letter seemed to be mentioned in Col. 4:16.

As an objection to Marcion's tradition it has been urged that the greeting to Laodicea in Col. 4:15 makes improbable the sending of a letter at the same time. But why must Paul be so sparing of his greetings? It is more surprising that Ephesians contains no greeting for the Colossians, and still stranger that Epaphras, who had worked in Laodicea (Col. 4:13), is not mentioned; but we must not be too exacting. The Apostle's mood cannot always be run into the same mold. Philippians, for example, is addressed to a very friendly church yet the farewell salutation is brief and rather general.

To assume that Ephesians was originally intended for Laodicea does not remove all difficulties, still this hypothesis seems to have several advantages over any other solution yet proposed; e.g. (1) it is true to the earliest available external evidence; (2) it accounts for the textual history of vs. 1 and makes possible a natural interpretation; (3) it allows one to recognize the personal element in the letter notwithstanding the general absence of local color; (4) it gives a perfectly evident reason for the close resemblances between Ephesians and Colossians; and (5) thus it removes one of the strongest arguments usually urged against regarding Ephesians as a genuine Pauline epistle.