

THE TOWNS OF THE LYCUS VALLEY

About one hundred miles from Ephesus, in the valley of the River Lycus, near where it joins the Maeander, there once stood three important cities—Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colosse. Originally they had been Phrygian cities but now they were part of the Roman province of Asia. They stood almost within sight of each other. Hierapolis and Laodicea stood on either side of the valley with the River Lycus flowing between, only six miles apart and in full view of each other; Colosse straddled the river twelve miles farther up.

The Lycus Valley had two remarkable characteristics.

(i) It was notorious for earthquakes. Strabo describes it by the curious adjective *euseistos*, which in English means *good for earthquakes*. More than once Laodicea had been destroyed by an earthquake, but she was a city so rich and so independent that she had risen from the ruins without the financial help which the Roman government had offered. As the John who wrote the *Revelation* was to say of her, in her own eyes she was rich and had need of nothing (*Revelation* 3: 17).

(ii) The waters of the River Lycus and of its tributaries were impregnated with chalk. This chalk gathered and all over the countryside built up the most amazing natural formations. Lightfoot writes in description of that area: "Ancient monuments are buried; fertile land is overlaid; rivers beds choked up and streams diverted; fantastic grottoes and cascades and archways of stone are formed, by this strange, capricious power, at once destructive and creative, working silently throughout the ages. Fatal to vegetation, these incrustations spread like a stony shroud over the ground. Gleaming like glaciers on the hillside, they attract the eye of the traveller at a distance of twenty miles, and form a singularly striking feature in scenery of more than common beauty and impressiveness."

A WEALTHY AREA

In spite of these things this was a wealthy area and famous for

two closely allied trades. Volcanic ground is always fertile; and what was not covered by the chalky incrustations was magnificent pasture land. On these pastures there were great flocks of sheep and the area was perhaps the greatest centre of the woollen industry in the world. Laodicaea was specially famous for the production of garments of the finest quality. The allied trade was dyeing. There was some quality in those chalky waters which made them specially suitable for dyeing cloth, and Colosse was so famous for this trade that a certain dye was called by its name.

So, then, these three cities stood in a district of considerable geographical interest and of great commercial prosperity.

THE UNIMPORTANT CITY

Originally the three cities had been of equal importance, but as the years went on, their ways parted. Laodicaea became the political centre of the district and the financial headquarters of the whole area, a city of splendid prosperity. Hierapolis became a great trade-centre and a notable spa. In that volcanic area there were many chasms in the ground from which came hot vapours and springs, famous for their medicinal quality, and people came in their thousands to Hierapolis to bathe and to drink the waters.

Colosse at one time was as great as the other two. Behind her rose the Cadmus range of mountains and she commanded the roads to the mountain passes. Both Xerxes and Cyrus had halted there with their invading armies, and Herodotus had called her "a great city of Phrygia." But for some reason the glory departed. How great that departure was can be seen from the fact that Hierapolis and Laodicaea are both to this day clearly discernible because the ruins of some great buildings still stand; but there is not a stone to show where Colosse stood and her site can only be guessed at. Even when Paul wrote Colosse was a small town; and Lightfoot says that she was the most unimportant town to which Paul ever wrote a letter.

The fact remains that in this town of Colosse there had arisen

a heresy which, if it had been allowed to develop unchecked, might well have been the ruination of the Christian faith.

THE JEWS IN PHRYGIA

One other fact must be added to complete the picture. These three cities stood in an area in which there were many Jews. Many years before, Antiochus the Great had transported two thousand Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia into the regions of Lydia and Phrygia. These Jews had prospered and, as always happens in such a case, more of their fellow-countrymen had come into the area to share their prosperity. So many came that the stricter Jews of Palestine lamented the number of Jews who left the rigours of their ancestral land for the wines and baths of Phrygia."

The number of Jews who resided there can be seen from the following historical incident. Laodicaea, as we have seen, was the administrative centre of the district. In the year 62 B.C., Placcus was the Roman governor resident there. He sought to put a stop to the practice of the Jews of sending money out of the province to pay the Temple tax. He did so by placing an embargo on the export of currency; and in his own part of the province alone he seized as contraband no less than twenty pounds of gold which was meant for the Temple at Jerusalem. That amount of gold would represent the Temple tax of no fewer than 11,000 people. Since women and children were exempt from the tax and since many Jews would successfully evade the capture of their money, we may well put the Jewish population as high as almost 50,000.

THE CHURCH AT COLOSSE

The Christian Church at Colosse was one which Paul had not himself founded and which he had never visited. He classes the Colossians and the Laodicaeans with those who had never seen his face in the flesh (2: 1). But no doubt the founding of the Church sprang from his directing. During his three years in Ephesus the whole province of Asia was evangelized, so that all its inhabitants, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the

Lord (*Acts* 19: 10). Colosse was about one hundred miles from Ephesus and it was no doubt in that campaign of expansion that the Colossian Church was founded. We do not know who its founder was; but it may well have been Epaphras, who is described as Paul's fellow-servant and the faithful minister of the Colossian Church and who is later connected also with Hierapolis and Laodicea (1: 7; 4: 12, 13). If Epaphras was not the founder of the Christian Church there, he was certainly the minister in charge of the area.

A GENTILE CHURCH

It is clear that the Colossian Church was mainly Gentile. The phrase *estranged and hostile in mind* (1: 21) is the kind of phrase which Paul regularly uses of those who had once been strangers to the covenant of promise. In 1: 27 he speaks of making known the mystery of Christ among the Gentiles, when the reference is clearly to the Colossians themselves. In 3: 5-7 he gives a list of their sins before they became Christians, and these are characteristically Gentile sins. We may confidently conclude that the membership of the Church at Colosse was largely composed of Gentiles.

THE THREAT TO THE CHURCH

It must have been Epaphras who brought to Paul, in prison in Rome, news of the situation which was developing in Colosse. Much of the news that he brought was good. Paul is grateful for news of their faith in Christ and their love of the saints (1: 4). He rejoices at the Christian fruit which they are producing (1: 6). Epaphras has brought him news of their love in the Spirit (1: 8). He is glad when he hears of their order and steadfastness in the faith (2: 5). There was trouble at Colosse certainly; but it had not yet become an epidemic. Paul believed that prevention was better than cure; and in the letter he is grasping this evil before it has time to spread.

What the heresy was which was threatening the life of the

Church at Colosse no one can tell for sure. "The Colossian Heresy" is one of the great problems of New Testament scholarship. All we can do is to go to the letter itself, list the characteristics we find indicated there and then see if we can find any general heretical tendency to fit the list.

(i) It was clearly a heresy which attacked the total adequacy and the unique supremacy of Christ. No Pauline letter has such a lofty view of Jesus Christ or such insistence on his completeness and finality. Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God; in him all fullness dwells (1: 15, 19). In him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge (2: 2). In him dwells the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form (2: 9).

(ii) Paul goes out of his way to stress the part that Christ played in creation. By him all things were created (1: 16); in him all things cohere (1: 17). The Son was the Father's instrument in the creation of the universe.

(iii) At the same time he goes out of his way to stress the real humanity of Christ. It was in the body of his flesh that he did his redeeming work (1: 22). The fullness of the Godhead dwells in him *sōmatikōs*, in bodily form (2: 9). For all his deity Jesus Christ was truly human flesh and blood.

(iv) There seems to have been an astrological element in this heresy. In 2: 8, as the Authorized Version has it, he says that they were walking after the *rudiments* of this world, and in 2: 20 that they ought to be dead to the *rudiments* of this world. The word translated *rudiments* is *stoicheia*, which has two meanings.

(a) Its basic meaning is *a row of things*; it can, for instance, be used for a file of soldiers. But one of its commonest meanings is the A B C, the letters of the alphabet, set out, as it were, in a row. From that it develops the meaning of *the elements of any subject*, the rudiments. It is in that sense that the Authorized Version takes it; and, if that is the correct sense, Paul means that the Colossians are slipping back to an elementary kind of Christianity when they ought to be going on to maturity.

(b) We think that the second meaning is more likely.

Stoicheia can mean *the elemental spirits of the world*, and especially the spirits of the stars and planets. The ancient world was dominated by thought of the influence of the stars; and even the greatest and the wisest men would not act without consulting them. It believed that all things were in the grip of an iron fatalism settled by the stars; and the science of astrology professed to provide men with the secret knowledge which would rid them of their slavery to the elemental spirits. It is most likely that the Colossian false teachers were teaching that it needed something more than Jesus Christ to rid men of their subjection to these elemental spirits.

(v) This heresy made much of the powers of demonic spirits. There are frequent references to *principalities* or *authorities*, which are Paul's names for these spirits (1: 16; 2: 10; 2: 15). The ancient world believed implicitly in demonic powers. The air was full of them. Every natural force—the wind, the thunder, the lightning, the rain—had its demonic superintendent. Every place, every tree, every river, every lake had its spirit. They were in one sense intermediaries to God and in another sense barriers to him, for the vast majority of them were hostile to men. The ancient world lived in a demon-haunted universe. The Colossian false teachers were clearly saying that something more than Jesus Christ was needed to defeat the power of the demons.

(vi) There was clearly what we might call a philosophical element in this heresy. The heretics are out to spoil men with philosophy and empty deceit (2: 8). Clearly the Colossian heretics were saying that the simplicities of the gospel needed a far more elaborate and recondite knowledge added to them.

(vii) There was a tendency in this heresy to insist on the observance of special days and rituals—festivals, new moons and sabbaths (2: 16).

(viii) Clearly there was a would-be ascetic element in this heresy. It laid down laws about food and drink (2: 16). Its slogans were: "Touch not; taste not; handle not" (2: 21). It was a heresy which was out to limit Christian freedom by insistence on all kinds of legalistic ordinances.

(ix) Equally this heresy had at least sometimes an anti-nomian streak in it. It tended to make men careless of the chastity which the Christian should have and to make him think lightly of the bodily sins (3: 5–8).

(x) Apparently this heresy gave at least some place to the worship of angels (2: 18). Beside the demons it introduced angelic intermediaries between man and God.

(xi) Lastly, there seems to have been in this heresy something which can only be called spiritual and intellectual snobbery. In 1: 28 Paul lays down his aim; it is to warn *every man*; to teach *every man* in *all* wisdom; and to present *every man* mature in Jesus Christ. We see how the phrase *every man* is reiterated and how the aim is to make him *mature* in *all* wisdom. The clear implication is that the heretics limited the gospel to some chosen few and introduced a spiritual and intellectual aristocracy into the wide welcome of the Christian faith.

THE Gnostic HERESY

Was there then any general heretical tendency of thought which would include all this? There was what was called *Gnosticism*. Gnosticism began with two basic assumptions about matter. First, it believed that spirit alone was good and that matter was essentially evil. Second, it believed that matter was eternal; and that the universe was not created out of nothing—which is orthodox belief—but out of this flawed matter. Now this basic belief had certain inevitable consequences.

(i) It had an effect on the doctrine of creation. If God was spirit, then he was altogether good and could not possibly work with this evil matter. Therefore God was *not* the creator of the world. He put out a series of emanations, each of which was a little more distant from God until at the end of the series there was an emanation so distant that it could handle matter; and it was this emanation which created the world. The Gnostics went further. Since each emanation was more distant from God, it was also more ignorant of him. As the series went on that ignorance turned to hostility. So the emanations

most distant from God were at once ignorant of him and hostile to him. It followed that he who created the world was at once completely ignorant of, and utterly hostile to, the true God. It was to meet that Gnostic doctrine of creation that Paul insisted that the agent of God in creation was not some ignorant and hostile power, but the Son who perfectly knew and loved the Father.

(ii) It had its effect on the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ. If matter was altogether evil and if Jesus was the Son of God, then Jesus could not have had a flesh and blood body—so the Gnostic argued. He must have been a kind of spiritual phantom. So the Gnostic romances say that when Jesus walked, he left no footprints on the ground. This, of course, completely removed Jesus from humanity and made it impossible for him to be the Saviour of men. It was to meet this Gnostic doctrine that Paul insisted on the flesh and blood body of Jesus and insisted that Jesus saved men in the body of his flesh.

(iii) It had its effect on the ethical approach to life. If matter was evil, then it followed that our bodies were evil. If our bodies were evil, one of two consequences followed. (a) We must starve and beat and deny the body; we must practise a rigid asceticism in which the body was kept under, and in which its every need and desire were refused. (b) It was possible to take precisely the opposite point of view. If the body was evil, it did not matter what a man did with it; spirit was all that mattered. Therefore a man could sate the body's desires and it would make no difference.

Gnosticism could, therefore, issue in asceticism, with all kinds of laws and restrictions; or, it could issue in antinomianism, in which any immorality was justified. And we can see precisely both these tendencies at work in the false teachers at Colosse.

(iv) One thing followed from all this—Gnosticism was a highly intellectual way of life and thought. There was this long series of emanations between a man and God; man must fight his way up a long ladder to get to God. In order to do that he

would need all kinds of secret knowledge and esoteric learning and hidden passwords. If he was to practise a rigid asceticism, he would need to know the rules; and so rigid would his asceticism be that it would be impossible for him to embark on the ordinary activities of life. The Gnostics were, therefore, quite clear that the higher reaches of religion were open only to the chosen few. This conviction of the necessity of belonging to an intellectual religious aristocracy precisely suits the situation at Colosse.

(v) There remains one thing to fit into this picture. It is quite obvious that there was a Jewish element in the false teaching threatening the Church at Colosse. The festivals and the new moons and the sabbaths were characteristically Jewish; the laws about food and drink were essentially Jewish levitical laws. Where then did the Jews come in? It is a strange thing that many Jews were sympathetic to Gnosticism. They knew all about angels and demons and spirits. But, above all, they said, "We know quite well that it takes special knowledge to reach God. We know quite well that Jesus and his gospel are far too simple—and that special knowledge is to be found nowhere else than in the Jewish law. It is our ritual and ceremonial law which is indeed the special knowledge which enables a man to reach God." The result was that there was not infrequently a strange alliance between Gnosticism and Judaism; and it is just such an alliance that we find in Colosse, where, as we have seen, there were many Jews.

It is clear that the false teachers of Colosse were tinged with Gnostic heresy. They were trying to turn Christianity into a philosophy and a theosophy, and, if they had been successful, the Christian faith would have been destroyed.

THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE LETTER

One question remains. Many scholars do not believe that Paul wrote this letter at all. They have three reasons.

(i) They say that in *Colossians* there are many words and phrases which do not appear in any other of Paul's letters. That is perfectly true. But it does not prove anything. We cannot

demand that a man should always write in the same way and with the same vocabulary. In *Colossians* we may well believe that Paul had new things to say and found new ways to say them.

(ii) They say that the development of Gnostic thought was, in fact, much later than the time of Paul so that, if the Colossian heresy was connected with Gnosticism, the letter is necessarily later than Paul. It is true that the great written Gnostic systems are later. But the idea of two worlds and the idea of the evil of matter are deeply woven into both Jewish and Greek thought. There is nothing in *Colossians* which cannot be explained by long-standing Gnostic tendencies in ancient thought, although it is true that the systematization of Gnosticism came later.

(iii) They say that the view of Christ in *Colossians* is far in advance of any of the letters certainly written by Paul. There are two answers to that.

First, Paul speaks of the unsearchable riches of Christ. In Colosse a new situation met him and out of these unsearchable riches he drew new answers to meet it. It is true that the Christology of *Colossians* is an advance on anything in the earlier letters of Paul; but that is far from saying that Paul did not write it, unless we are willing to argue that his thought remained for ever static. It is true to say that a man thinks out the implications of his faith only as circumstances compel him to do so; and in face of a new set of circumstances Paul thought out new implications of Christ.

Second, the germ of all Paul's thought about Christ in *Colossians* does, in fact, exist in one of his earlier letters. In 1 *Corinthians* 8: 6 he writes of *one Lord Jesus Christ through whom are all things and through whom we exist*. In that phrase is the essence of all he says in *Colossians*. The seed was there in his mind, ready to blossom when a new climate and new circumstances called it into growth.

We need not hesitate to accept *Colossians* as a letter written by Paul.

THE GREAT LETTER

It remains a strange and wonderful fact that Paul wrote the

letter which contains the highest reach of his thought to so unimportant a town as Colosse then was. But in doing so he checked a tendency, which, had it been allowed to develop, would have wrecked Asian Christianity and might well have done irreparable damage to the faith of the whole Church.