

THE LETTERS OF SAINT PAUL TO THE COLOSSIANS AND EPHESIANS

PART I - INTRODUCTION AND THEMES.

I. The letters to the Colossians and Ephesians were probably written at a similar time and deal with the themes of the unity in Christ and His Church and the living out of a life in imitation of Christ.

A. They are among the "captivity letters," which also include Phillipians and Philemon. They are called such because they appear to have been written during times of St. Paul's imprisonment. Colossians and Ephesians were apparently written when Saint Paul was under house arrest in Rome in the early 60s.

B. The patterns and themes of the letters are similar, but with some differences in backgrounds and tone.

1. Both of them: (1) begin with an introduction, which identifies St. Paul as an apostle, although the introduction in Colossians is much longer; (2) have a doctrinal section that contains a hymn and emphasizes Christ as head of the Church and St. Paul's own ministry; (3) then proceed onto a moral section, which includes discussions of the household; and (4) conclude with a call for prayers and a commendation of co-workers including Tychicus.

2. There is a lot of common phraseology, with Colossians 4:7-8 almost identical with Ephesians 6:21-22.

3. There are some differences in emphases.

- Ephesians has a more of a theme of uniting Gentiles with the promises made through the Jews. See, e.g., Eph. 2:11-3:6. The letter to the Colossians has some references to the union of Jews and Gentiles, see Col. 3:11, but it is more in passing. There does seem to be an effort in Colossians to reconcile the community from divisions, based upon some who held to Jewish rituals and some who did not. See Col. 2:16.

- Ephesians focuses on the Holy Spirit more often, with thirteen references as compared to one in Colossians. Furthermore, while both letters emphasize the unity of the Church, the term "church" is used nine times in Ephesians and four in Colossians. See, e.g., Eph 5:21-32.

- Ephesians has more of a theme of the family of God against the powers of the world and darkness, while Colossians warns more against heresies and divisions within the church. Compare Eph. 4:7-21 with Col. 2:9-23.

4. Most scholars conclude that the similarities indicate that the letters were written at a similar time, with the differences due to the differing circumstances of the two areas.

- Some have argued, however, that one (or both) of the letters was written by an associate of St. Paul, at St. Paul's direct request or under his guidance. Given the fact that the letter to the Ephesians has more language unique to that letter, that letter would more likely have been written by an associate.

II. The letter to the Colossians was written, probably about 60-62 A.D. to combat certain heresies that were threatening the community.

A. The letter to the Colossians may have been written to the people of that city in particular, or to the people the Lycus Valley, which Colossae was in. Laodacia and Hierapolis were prosperous cities of that, very close to Colossae, and St. Paul designated the letter at least to Laodacia as well. See Col. 4:15-16; see also Rev. 3:14-22.

1. During his second missionary journey, St. Paul had apparently not directly gone to Colossae, see Col. 1:5-6, but had evangelized Ephaphras and Philemon, who in turn seem to have brought the Gospel there, as well as Laodacia and Hierapolis. See Col. 1:6-7, 4:12-13; Phil. 1-2, 5, 23. Archippus, who is possibly the son of Philemon, is apparently a pastor in the area. See Col. 4:17, Philemon 1-2.

- The Gospel had probably come to the area of Phrygia shortly after Pentecost, see Acts 2:10, but it seems that Ephaphras and possibly Philemon had been crucial to bringing the Gospel to Colossae and the surrounding region in particular.

- St. Paul had also been in the area during his second and third missionary journeys, but there is no record of him personally stopping in Colossae or Laodacia.

2. Colossae had at one time been a central city in ancient times, but by the first century it was a fairly small city in Asia Minor (the western part of modern day Turkey) and in particular the southern part of the region of Phrygia. There was

apparently a sizable Jewish population there, which made evangelization at one level easier, but also created special issues in deciding what of the old faith to keep. See Col. 2:16, 3:11.

- In the early 60s A.D., there was a colossal earthquake, which destroyed most of the city. Given the fact that the letter does not refer to in any way to this event, it appears that the letter must have been written before it, and thus by 62 A.D. Given that St. Paul's Roman imprisonment began in about 60 or 61 A.D., the letter to the Colossians seems to have been written in the years 60-62. Some scholars have argued that it was written from Ephesus, where he was imprisoned during his second missionary journey in the early 50s. But this conclusion seems unlikely, given the fact that St. Mark was not with St. Paul on that journey, nor is there any evidence St. Luke was with him; and the letter refers to them being with St. Paul. See Col. 4:10.
- The occasion seems to be that St. Paul while he had received reports of erroneous views breaking out. He intended to visit Colossae, but wanted the letter to go before him so that the community would be at peace.

B. Overall, there is an introduction, a doctrinal section, a moral section, and a conclusion.

1. The introduction, which consists of the first 14 verses, strikes an optimistic tone and calls the readers back to the recognition of the glory that God calls them to. The emphasis is on sensing the light and wisdom of Christ as opposed to the darkness of the world.

2. The doctrinal section goes from chapter 1, verse 14, through chapter 2.

- It begins with the Colossians hymn in chapter 1, verses 15-20, which focuses on Jesus as the fulfillment of all things. The hymn is then applied to the people, as St. Paul calls for them to ground their lives in Christ.
- There is a personal note of St. Paul joining his sufferings to Christ and His church.
- Finally, St. Paul warns against certain false teachers who seemed to de-emphasize Christ, either with an emphasis on angelic or other powers or with a focus on festivals and calendar dates, probably inherited from the Jewish customs.

3. The moral section, which goes from chapter 3, verse 1 to chapter 4, verse 6, warns against numerous vices that there the people apart and calls the people to a joyous celebration of the faith. There is a special call for unity within the family and in common prayer.

4. The conclusion, which is in chapter 4, verses 7 to 18, gives some news, including that St. Mark and St. Luke are with St. Paul in Rome, and indicates that St. Paul was imprisoned there, but seems to take his imprisonment serenely. It also sends Tychicus as St. Paul's messenger.

III. The letter to the Ephesians, which bears many similarities to the letter to the Colossians, speaks of Christ and His Church as the fulfillment of human history and yearnings and the call to unity to the Church that one may be unified with Christ.

A. Ephesus was an old port city and among the leading cities in Asia Minor.

- The pagan worship centered on the worship of Artemis, the virgin goddess of the moon and the hunt. There had been an enormous temple to Artemis, which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The temple had been destroyed in an earthquake in 356 B.C., but later rebuilt. By the time of St. Paul, Ephesus was still the center of the worship of Artemis, but the Ephesians fancied themselves as a center of many faiths, and open to the wisdom of them all.

- The area had passed peacefully into the Roman Empire after a childless king bequeathed it to the emperor in 133 B.C. Because of trade, the city was very prosperous, and had a sizeable theater (seating about 24,000), a large forum, and a very active trading area. It was, for most practical purposes, the administrative center of the province of Asia Minor.

B. St. Paul evangelized the city during his second missionary journey, with apparently some success especially among the Jews. Apollos continued the good work there, also with some success. See Acts 18:19-28. St. Paul returned to Ephesus during his third missionary journey, clarified a point about baptism, dealt with some false exorcists, and began evangelizing with some success. See Acts 19:1-23. However, because the new faith was a threat to the pagan trade in idols, riots broke out and St. Paul was arrested by Gallio, who evaded the issue. See Acts 19:23-27.

- St. Paul would at this time or later appoint St. Timothy as the episcopos (now termed bishop) of Ephesus. See 1 Tim. 1:3. The Book of Revelation would recount the noble sufferings of the Christians in Ephesus, but also their laxness in some respects. See Rev. 2:1-7.

C. This letter also appears to have been written during St. Paul's Roman imprisonment in the early 60s, probably about the same time as the letter to the Colossians.

1. The letter refers to his imprisonment and is directed to the Ephesians. See Eph. 1:1, 3:1, 5:18-20.

2. Because the letter has an unusually short introduction and conclusion, is not as personal in nature as one would expect, given St. Paul's lengthy time in Ephesus in nature that usual for St. Paul, and has a sometimes unique vocabulary (with 83 words not used elsewhere in the Pauline letters), some have questioned whether St. Paul personally wrote the letter, although it was accepted as directly Pauline by all of the Church fathers.

- One possible explanation for the more impersonal nature is that it was meant, not only for the Ephesians, but also for the entire area around Ephesus.

D. The letter is structured mostly around its doctrinal section, centering around the centrality of Christ as the unifying principle of all things, and a moral section arguing for the living out of this belief.

1. The introduction is very brief, referring to the "holy ones" in Ephesus.

2. The doctrinal section consists of the first three chapters and is meant to show Christ as the center of all things.

- It begins with the Ephesians hymn, which sets forth the theme of the whole letter, describing how the Father sent the Son as the fulfillment of all history and human nature and concluding with the Holy Spirit who guarantees the faith. See Eph. 1:3-14. St. Paul then applies the hymn, calling for the readers to see in Christ the fulfillment of all hopes in the context of His body, the Church. See Eph. 1:15-23.

- In chapter 2, the letter then goes back and recounts how it is that Christ has incorporated the people were alienated from God. Through Christ, the Father has brought them into the promises made to Israel; and they have become citizens of His glorious kingdom and members of His family. It ends with a prayer that God strengthen the readers and let them know the dignity and calling they have received.

- In chapter 3, St. Paul then recounts his own ministry in bringing the promise in Christ to light for the peoples. There is a strong sense of the revelation of a mystery hidden for ages. St. Paul may have been arguing to the Ephesians that the desires for secret knowledge that led them to pagan worship are really fulfilled in Christ, the universal savior of all.

- This section ends with a doxology calling for the recognition of Christ as the fulfillment of every people, all knowledge and all accomplishment.

3. The moral section, which consists of the next three chapters, then calls for Christians to live out this new life.

- In the first 16 verses of chapter 4, it first calls for unity in the Church as the one body of Christ, who gives meaning to all the gifts God gives. There is a warning against fashionable teachings contrary to the message of Christ.

- Verses 17 to 24 of chapter 4 and verses 6 to 14 of chapter 5 then call for a new life "in the light," in contrast to the corruption of the world. Intertwined with these verses are specific warnings against fury, falsehood, foul language, greed, drunkenness and the like, which eliminate one's inheritance with God. There is instead a call to joyfulness in the Spirit.

- The remainder of chapter 5 and the first 9 verses of chapter 6 then describe the conduct of the household. In particular, there is the glorious description of Christian marriage as both the restoration of the order of creation and an image of the love between Christ and His church.

- The next 8 verses of chapter 6 then conclude the section with a military analogy of the faith.

4. The conclusion calls for prayers for the whole church (again called the holy ones) and especially for St. Paul himself. As with the letter to the Colossians, it indicates that Tychicus will be St. Paul.