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APOCRYPHA

VOLUME TWO: WRITINGS RELATING TO THE APOSTLES; APOCALYPTES AND RELATED SUBJECTS
Revised Edition

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2. The Epistle to the Laodiceans
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Introduction


2. Attestation and tradition: in the Muratorian Canon (cf. vol. I, p. 36) two Marcionite forgeries, an epistle to the Laodiceans and one to the Alexandrians, are mentioned and rejected. Apart from the suggestion that these books were ‘forged in Paul’s name for the sect of Marcion’ (lines 64ff.), the passage provides no sort of clue to any closer identification of this epistle. Tertullian reports (adv. Marc. V 11 and 17) that the heretics, i.e. the Marcionites, regarded Ephesians as the Epistle to the Laodiceans and that Marcion himself had made this change in the title. This note is confirmed to some extent by Epiphanius of Salamis (Haer. 42.9.4 and 42.12.3), who, it is true, gives no clear information as to whether the source which he copies here (Hippolytus) recognised Ephesians as the Epistle to the Laodiceans or whether in addition to Ephesians an Epistle to the Laodiceans also stood in the Marcionite canon. Filastrius (Haer. LXXXIX), who briefly mentions the Epistle to the Laodiceans in the context of his discussion of Hebrews, likewise goes no farther. Other references (assembled in Pink, op. cit.) also contribute little to our knowledge of the Epistle to the Laodiceans. The so-called Speculum (ps.-Augustine, de Divinis Scripturis, 5th or 6th century) is unambiguous: here verse 4 of the Epistle to the Laodiceans preserved in Latin is quoted (CSEL 12, 516); Gregory the Great must also be reckoned among the positive witnesses for this epistle handed down in Latin (Moralia 35.20.48; PL 76, 778C).

This Latin Epistle to the Laodiceans is found in many Bible manuscripts1, and was evidently widely disseminated in the West. There was also a series of translations into western vernaculars.2 Whether a Slavonic version existed is very doubtful.3 This is regrettable, since the existence of a Slavonic version would indicate that the letter ‘was also at home in the Byzantine east’ (de Santos). But so far no evidence has been found of a Greek text. On the other hand, later Greek sources speak of an epistle to the Laodiceans (cf. the compilation in Pink, op. cit.), so that we must at least assume that the existence of such an epistle was known in the East. The epistle probably came into being in the West (despite verse 5, the corrupt text of which may perhaps be remedied through translation back into Greek).
3. Content, occasion, date: when we consider this small apocryphon, we are amazed that it ever found a place in Bible manuscripts. For this pretended epistle of Paul is nothing other than a ‘worthless patching together of Pauline passages and phrases, mainly from the Epistle to the Philippians’ (Knopf-Krüger, *Apokr. 2*, p. 150). A suggestive statement of its contents can scarcely be given, and we seek in vain for a definite theological intention. The author seems to have gathered verses from Paul’s epistles, worded in as general terms as possible, that with his patch-work he might close a gap in the Pauline corpus, which could indeed be noticed by any Bible reader. There can be no doubt that Col. 4:16 was the occasion of this forgery. There it is said: ‘And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and have the one from Laodicea come to you that you may read it also.’ Here we do not need to inquire more closely what is to be understood by the ἐπιστολῇ ἐκ Λαοδίκειας. What still lies nearest at hand is that Paul refers to a letter to Laodicea which, however, has not come into the Pauline corpus. This want was to be met by the elaborate work of an unknown person who had a knowledge of the Bible, but in other respects had not exactly had a theological training.

The dating of the Epistle to the Laodiceans is difficult for the reason that it depends on the question of the identity of this apocryphon with the one mentioned in the Muratorian Canon, and this again is closely connected with the problem of its Marcionite derivation. Either the Muratorian Canon means the Epistle to the Ephesians, the name of which was changed by Marcion into the Epistle to the Laodiceans (so Tertullian) - that, however, is unlikely, since Ephesians is mentioned in the Muratorian Canon - or it had actually in view a separate Epistle to the Laodiceans, and then it must be the Latin Epistle to the Laodiceans that has come down to us, if we are not to assume several pseudo-Pauline letters to Laodicea. Certainly the Latin Epistle to the Laodiceans shows no sort of Marcionite character such as ought to be expected according to the statement of the Muratorian Canon.

4. The problem of the Marcionite derivation of the Epistle to the Laodiceans:
Whilst for a long time it was widely agreed that the Epistle to the Laodiceans was a colourless and dull compilation of Pauline sentences, A. von Harnack put forward the thesis that the Epistle is a Marcionite forgery: ‘In the Epistle to the Laodiceans we salute the only complete writing which has been preserved to us from the Marcionite church of the earliest time’ (*Marcion*², p. 149*). Harnack would like to see the ‘irrefutable’ proof of that in the fact that the Epistle to the Laodiceans begins with Gal. 1:1, i.e. with ‘monumental, anticatholic words in Marcion’s sense’ (p. 141*) from the epistle which stood at the head of the Marcionite apostolos. In the departure from Phil. 1:3 (gratias ago deo meo; Ep. to the Laodiceans verse 3: *Christo*), in the idea of *veritas evangelii* and in the addition *quod a me praedicatur* (verse 4), in the *ex me* (= oí ὑπόστα ἐξ ἐμοῦ; in Phil. 1:12 we read τὰ κατ’ ἐμέ), in the elimination of the ἐπιστολα Phil. 2:12 in Laod. verse 10 and in the twice-repeated appearance of *vita aeterna* (verses 5 and 10) Harnack sees the sagacity and the artfulness of Marcion at work. The Ep. to the Laodiceans must however have come not from the master himself but from a pupil who, between 160 and 190, after the title ‘Epistle to the Laodiceans’ had again become free (Ephesians had been given back its early
XIV. Apostolic Pseudepigrapha

name), produced it simultaneously in Latin and Greek. From the same workshop there also came the Marcionite Arguments on the Epistles of Paul.

Now the hypothesis of the Marcionite character of the Prologues to Paul is just as problematic as that of the antimarcionite Prologues to the Gospels. That the Roman church unknowingly took over Marcion’s Prologues to Paul into its ‘counter-canon’ (so de Bruyne and Harnack) is indeed scarcely conceivable. But here it can be left aside; it merely shows us on how precarious ground Harnack’s construction stands. Anyhow, it has of itself no convincing power. The passages added can be drawn upon only with violence as strict proof of a Marcionite origin of the Ep. to the Laodiceans. That the Marcionite forger - it certainly cannot have been the master himself - satisfied himself with such trifles and did not use the opportunity to give clearer expression to his theology does not speak for his ‘sagacity’. Further, from the fact that the epistle begins with Gal. 1:1 no far-reaching conclusions can be drawn. Harnack has here got on to a wrong track.

G. Quispel op. cit. has recently taken up Harnack’s hypothesis and attempted to support it from another side. He thinks that the beginning of the Ep. to the Laodiceans (= Gal. 1:1) answers to a stylistic expedient that was conventional in antiquity: in literary counterfeits it was made clear to the readers and hearers through the opening words which model was to be imitated. The beginning of the Ep. to the Laodiceans ought then to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that really there speaks here the Paul who - according to Marcion - had expounded in Galatians the decisive points of his theology. Consequently we should here have a case similar to the one in Jn. 1:1, where also a connection is intentionally made with Gen. 1:1. But this reasoning also may hardly carry conviction. For the Ep. to the Laodiceans does not purpose to be a rhetorical performance, and the author had obviously no literary ambitions. Too much honour is done the author of this paltry and carelessly compiled concoction when we judge him by the yardstick of ancient literary practices.

To sum up, it may be said that the Marcionite origin of the Latin Epistle to the Laodiceans is an hypothesis that can neither be proved nor sustained. It is rather a clumsy forgery, the purpose of which is to have in the Pauline corpus the Epistle to the Laodiceans mentioned in Col. 4:16. Whether the Epistle to the Laodiceans mentioned in the Muratori Canon is identical with this apocryphon remains unsettled. With that the possibility of an accurate dating also falls out. As the time of composition there comes into question the period between the 2nd century and the 4th.

* To the Laodiceans

1. Paul, an apostle not of men and not through man, but through Jesus Christ, to the brethren who are in Laodicea: 2. Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3. I thank Christ in all my prayer that you are steadfast in him and persevering in his works, in expectation of the promise for the day of judgment. 4. And may you not be deceived by the vain talk of some people who tell (you) tales that they may lead you away from the truth of the gospel which is proclaimed by me. 5. And now may God grant that those who come from me for the furtherance of the truth of the gospel (. . .) may
be able to serve and to do good works for the well-being of eternal life. 6. And now my bonds are manifest, which I suffer in Christ, on account of which I am glad and rejoice. 7. This ministers to me unto eternal salvation, which (itself) is effected through your prayers and by the help of the Holy Spirit, whether it be through life or through death. 8. For my life is in Christ and to die is joy (to me). 9. And this will his mercy work in you, that you may have the same love and be of one mind. 10. Therefore, beloved, as you have heard in my presence, so hold fast and do in the fear of God, and eternal life will be your portion. 11. For it is God who works in you. 12. And do without hesitation what you do. 13. And for the rest, beloved, rejoice in Christ and beware of those who are out for sordid gain. 14. May all your requests be manifest before God, and be ye stedfast in the mind of Christ. 15. And what is pure, true, proper, just and lovely, do. 16. And what you have heard and received, hold in your heart and peace will be with you. [17. Salute all the brethren with the holy kiss.] 18. The saints salute you. 19. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. 20. And see that this epistle is read to the Colossians and that of the Colossians among you.

Notes

2. The Epistle to the Laodiceans

3. Cf. de Santos, Überlieferung I, 147f.

To the Laodiceans

* The numbers of the notes refer to the verses of the Epistle.
2. Gal. 1:3; Phil. 1:2.
3. Phil. 1:3.
5. Verse 5 has been corrupted in transmission; the translation rests on conjecture; cf. Phil. 1:12.
6. Phil. 1:13, 18.
7. Phil. 1:19f.
10. Phil. 2:12.
XIV. Apostolic Pseudepigrapha

14. Phil. 4:6; cf. 1 Cor. 15:58; 2:16.
15. Phil. 4:8.
16. Phil. 4:9.
17. Lacking in some MSS; doubtless a secondary addition; 1 Thess. 5:26.
18. Phil. 4:22.
19. Phil. 4:23; Gal. 6:18.
20. The words ‘this epistle’ and ‘to the Colossians’ are lacking in some MSS; cf. Col. 4:16.