

19.21

## The Letter from Laodicea

The recipients of the letter to the Colossians are told, “When this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16). What was this “letter from Laodicea” that the Colossians were to read?

The traditional view is that Paul wrote a letter to the Laodiceans that has not survived. Some Christians throughout history have been bothered by the notion of such a work being lost, and at least two people in the second century took it upon themselves to “fill the gap” by writing letters from Paul to the Laodiceans that could be included in the Christian canon. One of these apparently reflected the ideas of the heretic Marcion, and we know of it only because certain documents (e.g., the Muratorian Canon) warn churches not to be tricked into using it. But another “Letter to the Laodiceans” was very brief and uncontroversial: a pastiche of pious verses that seem to have been stitched together from other letters of Paul. This latter book became extremely popular and was found in Latin manuscripts of the New Testament down through the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

An alternative suggestion holds that the letter mentioned in Colossians 4:16 is actually the letter that we know as Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians; that it is called “the letter *from* Laodicea” might

indicate that it was sent to Ephesus with instructions for it to be passed on to Laodicea and then, from there, sent to Colossae. This theory receives some support from the fact that a second-century writer (the aforementioned heretic Marcion, ironically) refers to the letter that we know as Ephesians as Paul's "Letter to the Laodiceans." Did he have a copy of "Ephesians" that was associated with Laodicea? We can only speculate, but if our letter to the Ephesians was in fact the "letter from Laodicea" that Paul had in mind, then that letter has not been lost after all.

1. The text of this apocryphal work appears in Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 164.