

*THE USE OF THE WORD "PLEROMA" IN EPHE-  
SIANS AND COLOSSIANS.*

SOMETIMES the frequent recurrence of a single word, or the use of one word in a special sense, determines largely the character of a book. In regard to such writings as those of the Apostle Paul this is particularly noticeable; and, indeed, most of his Epistles might be described by means of certain phrases oft repeated, specially used, or effectively emphasized. By carefully observing the characteristic words and phrases used in any particular Epistle, critics are able to strengthen greatly the conclusions which they reach by means of historical investigations in regard to the period at which it may have been written. If it be found that good reasons exist for assigning certain writings to one special period in the author's life, it will ordinarily follow that certain terms, reflecting the writer's circumstances and mood, will give to those writings a peculiar flavour and tone. Beyond all question those Epistles which are usually referred to the period of Paul's earlier imprisonment at Rome,—Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians,—are assimilated to one another by the common use of certain words and a preference for peculiar turns of thought rarely found in the earlier writings of the Apostle. Those peculiarities of phraseology, which give a distinctive character to this group of letters, are mainly occasioned by the influence of outward circumstances on the writer. In some cases the Apostle's own condition as a prisoner gives a tone more or less obvious to his language and to his treatment of particular subjects; and, in some cases, the position of the Church addressed, in its relation to Jewish or Pagan influences by which it might be surrounded, at once determines his vocabulary and fixes his line of thought.

The Epistle to the Colossians and the Epistle to the Ephesians are remarkably rich in terms which came to be used in a technical sense in the early philosophizing Christian schools,—terms which became fixed very definitely during the second century in the nomenclature of heretical sects, with applications wholly irreconcilable with the doctrine of the New Testament. Rationalistic commentators have fixed upon the use of these terms as proof that the Epistles in which they appear could not have been written until the heresies of which these terms became the recognized watch-words had been fully developed. It deserves, therefore, to be very

carefully considered whether such words are really used in Colossians and Ephesians in a directly polemical way, or whether we have not rather an immediately dogmatic intention which only does not exclude a subordinate polemical reference. And if it be found that the main purpose of the writer is not the demolition of existing heresy, but rather the upbuilding of believers in the true Christian faith, it may surely be concluded that the indirectness of the polemical reference points to an extremely undeveloped form of the heresy, while the emphatic dogmatic tone shews simply the earnest desire of the writer to prevent the growth of possible or threatened heresy by securing the establishment of believers in the truth. In these two Epistles the most characteristic and most frequently used terms are those which describe Christianity as the Perfect Religion,—whether the terms so used are immediately applied to Christ or to the members of his Church. The same terms generally are employed in both Epistles, because the same subject is treated of in both, though for a distinct and special purpose in each. The gospel is commended to the Ephesians and to the Colossians because it reconciles God and man in Christ. Special prominence is given in Colossians to the absolute supremacy of Christ, to his headship over all creatures: and particularly his undivided sovereignty is emphasized. In Ephesians special prominence is given to the unity of the Church in Christ: it is the One Body directed by the One Head. Yet in Colossians (*e.g.* i. 18–28) the idea of the Church is present; and in Ephesians (*e.g.* i. 21, 22) the absolute superiority of the One Christ is clearly though summarily stated. Those correlated doctrines, both of which receive ample exposition in the two Epistles viewed together, constitute the grand demonstration that Christianity is the Perfect Religion.<sup>1</sup> Christ—the same Christ as that set forth in Ephesians—is shewn in Colossians (ii. 9) to be the perfect embodiment of deity; and

<sup>1</sup> "Christianity," says Ritschl, "has made good its claim to be the perfect religion in comparison with other forms and stages thereof, for it actually affords to man that which in all the other religions is indeed striven after, but only hovers in view indistinctly and incompletely. That is the perfect religion in which the perfect knowledge of God is possible" ("Unterricht in der Christlichen Religion," § 2). That which in Ephesians and Colossians together is made known to us is God in Christ,—his perfect image and true representative (Colossians) reconciled to man, who as a member of Christ's body is received into fellowship with Himself (Ephesians). This joint result of the doctrinal contents of these Epistles constitutes that knowledge of God which only a perfect religion can afford.

every member of Christ's Church,—that Church described in Colossians as Christ's body,—is perfected and edified until he comes unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ (Ephesians iv. 13). Now the one term by which at once the completeness of Christ and the completeness of his Church are described and receive final expression in these Epistles is that word *Pleroma* (fulness), which, in the vocabulary of the Gnostic schools, appears as a term with a very special and definite signification. We shall confine ourselves to the examination of this one word and those verbal forms belonging to the same root which occur thirteen times in these two Epistles. Is the writer's use of the words signifying "fulness," or "being filled," or "completed," such that we can only regard him as writing after that Gnosticism, which made the idea of the *Pleroma* a central one, had been fully developed?

The use of this word in the Epistle to the Colossians and in the Epistle to the Ephesians will be found on examination to be quite the same. In Colossians the word *Pleroma* is immediately applied to Christ, and occurs in two almost identical passages. In Chapters i. 19, ii. 9, it clearly means the full complement of the powers of deity; and "all" is added in both passages, not because fulness can be in any way incomplete, but to emphasize the truth that Christ in Himself, and not as one of an order, constitutes this fulness. In Ephesians the word *Pleroma* has a seeming twofold use, which, however, is really one.<sup>1</sup> Thus Chapter i. 23 describes the

<sup>1</sup> Pfeiderer, on the contrary, maintains that *Pleroma* has quite a different meaning in Ephesians from that which it has in Colossians. "There (in Colossians) it is a dogmatic notion, and refers to the fulness of the Godhead, of the Divine power to save, the dwelling of which in Christ gave Him his position as head over all things in the universe and in the community; but in our epistle (Ephesians) it is an ethical notion, the sense of which varies indeed in particular points, but is nowhere that of Col. i. 19 and ii. 9" ("Paulinism," vol. ii p. 172). The use of the word *Pleroma* is elaborately discussed in the pages following that quoted; and the author seeks to emphasize the distinction between a Christological reality and an ethical ideal. This is done in the interest of Pfeiderer's contention against Hitzig and Holtzmann. These last-named hold that the Epistle to the Colossians was revised; at least the first two chapters being inserted in opposition to the later Gnostics, and so far Pfeiderer agrees. He refuses, however, with them to identify this reviser with the writer of Ephesians. The distinction which he insists upon between the use of *Pleroma* in Ephesians and Colossians is intended to support the view of independent authorship. Apart from such a preconception, it should not surely be hard to find a deep and satisfactory ground on which dogmatic truths and ethical principles might meet.

Church as Christ's fulness, and so Chapter iv. 13 represents Christ's fulness as the measure of Christian attainment; while in Chapter iii. 19 we have the Christian's advancement unto the knowledge of Christ's love described as a being filled with the fulness of God. Now evidently in all these three passages Christ is understood to be the fulness of God according to the passages in Colossians and this last in Ephesians. This fulness of God is Christ's fulness, and becomes theirs who are Christ's. Thus, in every instance in which the word *Pleroma* is used in Colossians and Ephesians, the meaning that Christ is Himself the complete embodiment of the Divine powers is either expressly stated or is by immediate necessity assumed. The use of the term as thus analysed indicates on the part of the writer the attainment of very deep and comprehensive theological views.

Now it is perhaps not to be wondered at that often this depth of theological insight on the part of the writer, or writers, of these Epistles should have been mistaken for the elaborate exposition of a Christian Gnosis in opposition to a heretical Gnosis already fully developed. Certainly we find the view prevailing among German critics that neither Ephesians, nor Colossians as we now have it, could have come from the hand of Paul, because, according to their understanding of the writer's use of such terms as those referred to above, we must assume the contemporary existence of the heresies by which the middle of the second century is characterized. This notion has taken so firm a hold, that even outside of the old tendency-school of Tübingen, among critics like Hitzig, and Weiss, and Holtzmann, who admit portions of Colossians to be undoubtedly the work of Paul, it is yet energetically maintained that those passages in which terms common to the Gnostic schools are used must be regarded as interpolations made by one who lived in the second century, to whose revision at least the first two chapters of the Epistle must be credited. With characteristic confidence Hitzig affirms that the reviser of Colossians was the writer of Ephesians; but beyond the assurance that he knows it, and that it is clear as day, he offers us no proof. (See the whole hypothesis put in a most interesting and summary way: "Zur Kritik Paulinischer Briefe," S. 26.) If, however, we find no ground for the supposition of a twofold authorship in the case of Colossians; if, after carefully considering the earlier chapters in their relation to the later, we still feel ourselves entitled to maintain the integrity of

the Epistle; then we may claim the support of Hitzig's faculty for recognizing similarities of style in proving that Ephesians and Colossians came from the same hand. Pfeiderer indeed rejects the idea of one author for both Epistles; but he seems to have no other argument than this, that the end in view in the one Epistle is different from that in the other. Had they had the same end in view, this would have proved the writer of the one to be only a weak imitator of the other: but as they have different ends in view, this shews the authors to be different. Thus the critics differ as to whether they should regard the writer of Colossians and the writer of Ephesians as one; but they agree in assigning the authorship of both to the middle of the second century, when the Gnostic system had reached its full development. "It was not," says Holtzmann, "till the beginning of the second century that attempts were made on an extensive scale to give to Christianity the form and fashion of an ascetic theosophy of the Jewish stamp; and the earliest data for resistance to those attempts are found in the interpolated Epistle to the Colossians. The existence of a false doctrine according to which the *Pleroma* was not concentrated in Christ, but spread over the whole upper world of spirits, is as improbable in the age of the Apostles as it is natural in the age of Gnosticism." ("Kritik der Epheser- und Kolosser-briefe," S. 291.) In these two sentences we have a summary at once of the grounds or principles, and of the conclusions of this whole school of critics, regarding the date and authorship of these two Epistles. All such critics either assume, or endeavour to prove, that both in Ephesians and in Colossians direct allusion is made to Jewish-ascetic religious philosophy, and also that the polemical passages in these Epistles are so directly controversial in their tone that the writers must have had before them the fully developed form of the heresy which belongs to the second century. Holtzmann too has perceived that the controversy circles round the idea of the *Pleroma*. In an investigation regarding the word *Pleroma*, and the idea represented by it, our interest is not with the ascetic element in the Jewish theosophy which may have influenced and endangered the purity of early Christianity, but rather with those tendencies to a fantastic angelology which were generally to be found side by side with the enforcement of ascetic practices. With the usual dogmatism of his school, Holtzmann affirms the improbability, which according to his use of it really amounts to the impossibility, of the notion

appearing in any measure during the Apostolic Age of a distribution of the divine power among several ministering agencies. But this is by no means so evident that we are prepared to accept the statement without investigation. If we consider the character and prevailing doctrinal conceptions of the various Jewish sects with which more or less closely the members of the early Christian Churches must have been brought into contact, we shall, perhaps, be led to admit that speculations and doctrinal views in the Church may have, in some quarters, at a very early period, received a certain colour which under favourable circumstances of locality, or race, might deepen in its hue until the original tint had become scarcely traceable. That the earliest Christian Churches were in close relation to various Jewish sects is undeniable. Out of these Jewish schools many of the first Christian converts were brought. The Christian Church, on the other hand, exerted a mighty influence upon some of the more earnest and devout of these Jewish religious societies; notably in the case of the Essenes who, partially before, and as a body immediately after, the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, entered the Christian fellowship and marked their presence in it by the Ebionistic views which prevailed among them. Of the Jewish influences at work we shall have more to say presently.

The point with which we are just now directly concerned is the determining of the question whether the tone of those Epistles most naturally suggest the Apostolic Age or the second century as the date of their writing. Is the use made of the word *Pleroma* by the writer of Colossians and the writer of Ephesians, such as we might expect from one face to face with an elementary undeveloped tendency to the honouring of angels, thus endangering the position of the one Mediator between God and man? Or is it such as we might expect to be used against the elaborate systems of error which during the second century appear linked with the names of Valentinus and other leaders of highly speculative genius? In order that one may satisfy himself as to the extreme improbability of such passages as we have in Colossians and Ephesians, where the *Pleroma* is spoken of, having been written in the second century, we need only refer to the highly wrought systems of that later age. When we consider the elaborate mythology of the Valentinian Gnostics (see a brilliant and singularly clear exposition of their strange, yet, in part, beautiful and truly poetic fantasies, in

Pressensé, "Heresy and Christian Doctrine," Bk. I. Ch. i. § 2), we must surely acknowledge that the mere allusions, which we find in these Epistles, to a doctrine of angels which threatens to partition the work and office of Christ, would be an extremely inadequate and unsatisfactory way of dealing with a philosophical speculation that scarcely retained for the Christ any place at all. Indeed it is most noticeable that in these Epistles we are never led back to any philosophical theory which is understood to be the ground of the erroneous views, which surely would have been the case had there been any polemical intention against an elaborated system. It is clearly something quite unformed, something with no elaborate philosophical basis, that is opposed in our Epistles. If reference be made to the enumeration of spiritual powers in Colossians i. 16 and Ephesians i. 21, it may not be denied that there is an allusion here to the seeds of those Gnostic doctrines which by and by were elaborated into a system, but of the system itself there is no trace. As Reuss remarks ("Geschichte der Heiligen Schriften Neuen Testaments," § 123), the Gnostic elements in such passages as these are old enough and Jewish enough to have been known to Paul when he wrote his Epistles to the Romans and to the Corinthians, the genuineness of which are unquestioned. (See Rom. viii. 38; 1 Cor. xv. 24.) The ages (æons *αἰώνες*) are mentioned indeed in Ephesians ii. 7, iii. 21, yet they are not personified as mediating beings, nor is there any polemical reference to such creations. And, further, although the word *Pleroma* is used in Colossians and Ephesians, and occurs also in the system of Valentinus, the term only is common to the Epistles and to the Gnostic system. The idea in the one case is altogether different from that in the other. Its use in the Epistles affords no hint that the writer had any notion of its technical significance in the vocabulary of Gnosticism. The doctrine of the *Pleroma* in the Epistles,—the doctrine that Christ bears in Himself the fulness of the divine powers, as *εἰκὼν* and *λόγος*, is as old as Christianity itself.

Its being thus evident that no instance can be found in these Epistles of an unquestionable technical use of such terms as became strictly technical in the Gnostic systems of the second century, we must enquire regarding the traces that are discovered of that in the Apostolic Age which might have suggested the use, and warranted the application, of such phrases. And first of all we may

call attention to the doctrine of angels which Paul himself adopted from the Jews, and mark the limits within which this doctrine was confined. As we have already seen, he recognized several classes among the spiritual powers (Rom. viii. 38; Eph. i. 21; Col. i. 16), yet he refuses, as is apparent from the variations in his lists, to lend any support to the elaborate classifications which were characteristic of Jewish angelology. Such attempts at minute classification, endeavours to arrange the heavenly powers in ranks according to distinctions of dignity and service, would almost with certainty lead to the worshipping of those powers reckoned most glorious. A certain influence, also, we find allowed to the angels, as in some way assisting in the communication of the Mosaic law (Gal. iii. 19); yet the writer is very careful to avoid the conclusion to which a Jew might, at this point, be tempted to come, that these angels should be ranked alongside of Moses, the lawgiver, and so alongside of Him who was the prophet raised up like unto Moses. These angels, the Apostle urges in the passage from Galatians above referred to, are not properly mediators at all, for the mediator must be human, handling the law, bearing it in his hands. Whatever service the angels render, and far from denying that they render service, the Apostle emphatically affirms it, that service did not consist in bringing the law to us as mediators between us and God: this service was rendered by a mediator who bore the law in his hands, that is, by one not of the angelic race. Now here we have undoubtedly certain tendencies which must have been present among Jewish Christians, tendencies to shew an excessive reverence for the angels. And very naturally, just on this very question of the Mediator, those who came under Jewish influences would be tempted to find for the angels a place alongside of Christ, the one Mediator recognized by Paul. What more reasonable than the statements regarding Christ's *Pleroma* as addressed to those who were tempted thus to picture to themselves other beings as sharers with the Christ of the divine fulness? And probably we may find still further a point of contrast between the Jewish exaggeration of the doctrine of angels and incipient Gnosticism in the early Christian Church, in an undue emphasis in the expression of a view countenanced by the inspired Apostles, that good angels are the special guardians of the believers. This was the correlate of that old Jewish belief that evil angels were the Lords of heathendom. An exaggerated statement of this doctrine of guardian angels would



necessarily lead to angel worship. Even had there been nothing more to combat than these tendencies, which from the earlier Epistles of Paul we thus find to have been already at work, we should have enough to warrant all the allusions to Gnostic doctrines that are to be found in the Epistles to the Colossians and to the Ephesians. In presence of such tendencies proved from Scripture to have existed in the time of Paul, we have a sufficient explanation of the doctrine of the Pleroma now under investigation.

This view, however, may be yet further confirmed when we consider the hints that we have from other quarters of the actual current of thought which prevailed in influential circles during the infancy of the Christian Church. Within a comparatively recent period an important witness has been discovered in the person of Hippolytus. This distinguished theologian, living in the first half of the third century, tells us that the heresies which were openly maintained in the beginning of the second century, had been secretly spreading, and finding considerable favour during the preceding age. "This hydra," he says, speaking of those second century heresies, "which casts forth so many blasphemies against Christ, has been crouching in the dark for many years." (See Pressensé, "Apostolic Age," Bk. II. ch. iv. § 2.) Among scholars there is not yet perfect agreement as to the personality of the originator of this early Gnosticism of the Apostolic Age. Yet more and more it is being recognized that Simon Magus, a contemporary of the Apostles, referred to very doubtfully in Scripture, and bearing in early Church history a still more doubtful reputation, deserves to be styled the first Apostle of Gnosticism. Ueberweg, in his "History of Philosophy," speaks with hesitation, holding that it is quite uncertain how far the beginning of Gnosticism may be attributed to him, and that certainly much has been unhistorically attributed to him that belongs to Paul and to later individuals; but that a sect bearing his name undoubtedly sprang up, under the influence of which came both Saturninus and Basilides. Reuss even ventures to say that the view, which has prevailed since Irenæus, representing Simon as the first Gnostic, is no longer even a hypothesis, but a fable. On the other hand, those who have given attention to the writings of Hippolytus, in part contemporary with Irenæus, find the earlier Father's statements fully confirmed, and many particulars given that leave no doubt as to the fact of Simon Magus' immediate and powerful influence on the religious philosophy of his day. As

represented in Hippolytus, the doctrine of angels in its most exaggerated Jewish form reappeared, embellished with further theories of emanation, crude and undigested, yet quite sufficient to call forth such opposition as we find offered in Colossians. (For references to Apocryphal, Gnostic, and Patristic works shewing the prominence given to angelology under Jewish influences, see Lightfoot, in note on Colossians ii. 18.)

Besides these instances, and contemporary and sufficiently trustworthy historical evidences of the early prevalence of elementary Gnostic doctrines in and around the Christian Churches, we have further confirmation of the views already expressed from the national temperament of the people addressed. That such theories regarding angels should have prevailed just in Colosse, a leading city of Phrygia, and should have assumed a form at a very early period, need not surprise us when we consider the excitable character of the Phrygians and their tendency to mysticism. Later on we find Montanism taking a strong hold upon this people, and the synod which met at the Phrygian city of Laodicea about the middle of the fourth century, warned the Christians (Canon 34) against the worship of false martyrs; and the very next Canon forbids Christians to forsake the Church of God and turn to the worship of angels. In the century following the meeting of this synod, and notwithstanding those repeated warnings given, we learn from Theodoret, in his Commentary on Colossians ii. 18, that in his time there were "Michael Churches" in Phrygia and Pisidia. On this Canon, Hefele, although as a Roman Catholic he vindicates what he calls a regulated worship of angels, remarks: "The basis of this worship of angels was the idea that God was too high to be immediately approached, but that his goodwill must be gained through the angels."<sup>1</sup> This, then, the prevailing tendency of the Phrygian churches,—the tendency to multiply mediators and thus to deprive the Christ of that absolute undivided supremacy which the true Scripture doctrine requires,—is just that in opposition to which such a doctrine would be most appropriate as that of the *Pleroma* in Colossians and Ephesians, setting forth clearly this vital doctrine of the divine fulness dwelling bodily in the incarnate Saviour.

In regard to the Apostle's use of the word *Pleroma* there is just one question more which we must endeavour to answer. There

<sup>1</sup> Hefele, "History of Church Councils," vol. ii. p. 317.

can be no doubt that in Colossians the divine fulness is ascribed not to the pre-existent Christ, nor yet to the glorified Christ, but to the incarnate Saviour in his earthly life of humiliation. 'It is of the eternal Son of God become man that this is predicated—which would be a truism if applied to Him in his pre-existent or exalted state—that He is the fulness of the divine power. Does such a representation agree with the general course of Pauline doctrine, and particularly is it reconcilable with the doctrine of Paul as set forth in Philippians ii. 6-11? Pfeiderer<sup>1</sup> insists that, while this is evidently the meaning of the passage in Colossians, it is in direct opposition to Pauline doctrine, and in immediate contradiction to the representation given in Philippians of the earthly life of Christ as a condition of humiliation and emptiness. He thinks that the Christology of Colossians goes beyond even that of Hebrews, and corresponds with that of John. According to Pfeiderer, Philippians is the last writing of Paul, and represents the fullest and most mature stage of his doctrine; and in that Epistle, he maintains, we have the subordination of Christ to the Father most emphatically expressed. Entertaining such a view of the passage in Philippians, we are not surprised to find that the idea of the divine fulness belonging to the earthly Christ is described as thoroughly un-Pauline. In answer to all this we can only repudiate the exegesis of the Philippian text above proposed, and affirm its perfect agreement, when fairly interpreted, with the Christ-honouring doctrine of Colossians. The Apostle very distinctly regards equality with God—that is the full display and exercise of all the attributes of God—as something which the Christ, even in the hour of his deepest humiliation, might have asserted by a mere act of will. He voluntarily shut himself off from the exercise of these forms of the divine power, and his act of will in doing so was itself the most glorious forthputting of the divine power; and upon this continued presence of the divine fulness, under a new and special form, and through emptying Himself of that other form, depended the efficacy of his work as our redeemer. When thus understood, the true Pauline doctrine of the *Pleroma* is traceable as distinctly in the view given of the *Kenosis* in Philippians, as in the glowing description of the Saviour's dignity and mighty power in Colossians and Ephesians.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Pfeiderer, "Paulinism," vol. i. pp. 145, 146, and vol. ii. p. 104.