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THE LUKEWARMNESS OF LAODICEA (Rev. iii.16)

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In his study of the *Letters to the Seven Churches*, Sir William Ramsay argued that, at the time that the Apocalypse was written, each letter had been especially appropriate to the particular church to which it was addressed. The phraseology of each letter contained allusions to the contemporary circumstances of the city concerned. These allusions had been used as symbolic material to portray the spiritual character of each church. Some have dismissed Ramsay's interpretation as far-fetched, but on a recent visit to the sites of the seven cities it was felt that the majority of the suggested geographical allusions were plausible. This note arises out of some observations made around Laodicea, and is concerned with the significance of the terms 'hot', 'cold' and 'lukewarm'. It is curious that Ramsay offered no interpretation of this part of the letter. Most other commentators have taken 'lukewarmness' as a symbol of compromise between the fervent 'heat' of a believer and the indifferent 'cold' of an unbeliever. But this interpretation involves a straining of the text. It assumes that even 'cold' is better than 'lukewarmness', that even a pagan unbeliever is preferable in God's sight to a lapsed Christian; whereas in the text the association of 'hot' and 'cold' is repeated three times in a way which suggests very strongly that they symbolise *equally* commendable alternatives to 'lukewarmness.'

Ramsay pointed out that Laodicea was built on a site which was chosen only for its position at an important road-junction. It lacked a natural water supply, and had to obtain its water from some source lying to the south, for the terminal part of an aqueduct from that direction is still extant. It is in the unusual form of two stone pipes, which are badly choked with mineral matter similar to that deposited by the hot-springs at Hierapolis a few miles away. Hot-springs are not uncommon in the area, and it is possible that, in the absence of any permanent source of more normal water in the neighbourhood, Laodicea had to obtain its supply from *another* such hot-spring. If this was so, the hot water would have cooled very slowly in stone pipes, and even after flowing several miles it would probably still be warm when it reached the city. The 'lukewarmness' of the Laodicean church may therefore be an allusion to the city's water supply.

It is possible that the terms 'hot' and 'cold' also had definite local significance. At Hierapolis the hot-spring water apparently played a major part in the healing cult which flourished there. The mineral matter deposited from the water has formed a terrace edged with spectacular white cascades. These are clearly visible from Laodicea, and are one of the more conspicuous features of the view. Hence the mention of 'hot water' might well have reminded a Laodicean of the curative waters of his city's closest neighbour. For the greater part of the year the region is very hot and dry. In such a climate cold water is a most valuable source of refreshment, and the mention of 'cold water' inevitably brings to mind associations of that kind.

If this reconstruction of the local situation is correct, Laodicea must have been notorious as a city which, for all its prosperity, could provide *neither* the refreshment of cold water for the weary, *nor* the healing properties of hot water for the sick; its lukewarm water would be useless for either purpose, nauseous in taste and only fit to be 'spewed out of the mouth'. The church in Laodicea may have been intended to see in itself a similar uselessness: it was providing *neither* refreshment for the spiritually weary *nor* healing for the spiritually sick; it was totally ineffective, and hence distasteful to its Lord. On this interpretation, the church was not being informed of the state of its own 'spiritual temperature': instead, it was being called to reflect upon the quality and effectiveness of its *works*. The statement of its 'lukewarmness' is followed by an analysis of the cause ('*for* you say . . .') of its ineffectiveness: it is self-satisfied, complacent and unaware of its true state. But this self-deception, though culpable, is unconscious; there is no hint of deliberate compromise. It had not become lukewarm because worldly interests had chilled its proper fervour; but it had become ineffective because, believing that they were spiritually well-equipped, its members had closed their doors and left their real Provider outside.

This interpretation of the verse is tentative, although a more thorough exploration of the area might place it on a firmer basis. However, it is felt to be more in accord with the local conditions of Laodicea and with the structure and argument of the Letter than the more usual interpretation. It is true that the cognates of *zestos* and *psychros* are used elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts xviii.25; Mt. xxiv.12) in metaphorical senses which seem to favour the traditional interpretation. But there is no reason why the words should not have been used with different meanings in a local context in which their literal senses were pregnantly allusive.

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