

The Case for Torah

A Study of Colossians Chapter 2

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Colossians Introduction

Many have used the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians to show that believers in Christ are no longer obligated to observe certain Old Testament laws. Specifically, these verses are referenced to argue that we no longer need to keep the dietary laws, and the Sabbath, and the feast days found in the Torah. Let's look at the verses in question:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:13–17).

This passage raises several questions:

- What is “the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands”?
- How did the canceling of this record disarm the rulers and authorities?
- Who was passing judgment on the Colossian believers? What did they believe, especially with regard to food, drink, and the biblical festivals (festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths)?
- What does Paul mean when he calls these things a shadow, and how does the substance belong to Christ?

To answer these questions, we need to consider the letter as a whole and see what we can determine about the context of the letter.

We do not have a lot of information regarding who was behind the Colossian heresy and what their specific beliefs were. Some kind of false teaching was threatening the Colossian church, yet exactly what constituted it is debated among scholars. Colossians scholar Peter T. O'Brien describes several different possibilities including Gnostic-influenced Essene Judaism, a pagan mystery cult, a combination of Gnostic Judaism with pagan elements, and Jewish Christian Mystical Ascetism (xxxiii-xxxviii). A common position is that this heresy was some type of proto-Gnosticism. Gnosticism, which was fully developed in the second century AD, included worship of angels and asceticism, so many feel that the Colossian heresy was some earlier form of this (see Dunn, 27-28 for a description of this view). However, there also existed similar mystical beliefs within Judaism (with extra-biblical sources), some dating even before the time of Christ.¹ With the spread of Greek culture under Alexander the Great, it is no surprise that we find these Hellenistic philosophies permeating into Jewish thought at this time.

1 The apocryphal books of 1 Enoch and Testament of Levi, both dating before the time of Christ, detail a mystical ascension to the throne room of God (Laansma, 730). Over time, ideas of ascension further developed to include preparation and technique for making the ascent. This would include fasting, eating special foods, and bathing beforehand, as well as using trance-like states, hymns, prayers, incantations, etc. to make the ascent (Laansma, 728). Communion with angels was also sought by some Jewish sects (Laansma, 731).

While it is difficult to label which religious group is causing the Colossian problem, we can at the very least use the text itself to understand some of the threatening false beliefs.

Before addressing the heresy (in chapter two), Paul reminds the Colossians of the sufficiency and fullness of Christ (in chapter one). We have redemption in him (1:14). He is the very image of the invisible God (1:15). Through him and for him, all things were created (1:16). He is before all things and in him all things hold together (1:17). He is the head of the body, which is the church (1:18). It is crucial for Paul to establish all of this in order to remind the Colossians that they must stay grounded and stable in Christ and who he is and who they are in Christ (1:23). In contrast, the false teaching at Colossae was not grounded in Christ - it was disconnected from the Head (2:19) and therefore empty (2:8). Its origin was not of God but of man (2:8,21,23). Paul wants the Colossians "to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:2-3) so that they are not led astray by the false teaching.

Beginning in chapter two, Paul gives specifics about the false teaching that has infiltrated the Colossian church. What does Paul say about this heresy?

- Some are trying to delude the Colossian believers with plausible arguments (2:4).
- Paul warns them against being taken captive by philosophy and empty deceit (2:8).
- This heresy is according to human tradition (2:8), human precepts and teachings (2:21), and self-made religion (2:23).
- It is according to the elemental spirits of the world (2:8).
- It is not according to Christ (2:8).
- Members of this heresy are passing judgment on the Colossians concerning food, drink, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths (2:16; cf. 2:21).
- They insist on asceticism (2:18, 23; cf. 2:21).
- They worship angels and stress visions (2:18).
- They are not connected to the Head, which is Christ (2:19).
- They appear wise (2:23).
- Their man-made traditions have no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (2:23).

Let's consider some of the bullet points above. Paul says that the origin of the false teaching is of man and of the elemental spirits of the world (2:8,21,23). In the Greek, "elemental spirits of the world" is "στοιχεια του κοσμου" (*stoicheia tou kosmou*). This phrase is commonly used in extrabiblical texts; however, in the New Testament, it is only found here in Colossians two and in Galatians four. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG) defines its usage

in two different ways. The first uses *stoicheia tou kosmou* as the basic components of something (946). This could include substances of the natural world (earth, wind, fire, air) or the basic components of celestial constellations, which would focus on the heavenly bodies, the stars, and the signs of the zodiac. The basic components can even refer to the fundamental principles of learning, such as the alphabet. Second, *stoicheia tou kosmou* can be understood to mean “transcendent powers that are in control over events in this world” (ibid). In this latter sense, the phrase refers to spiritual beings who exhibit some sense of power over the world. Some say Paul uses the phrase more in the first sense of basic components, and that it therefore refers “to the elementary forms of religion, Jewish and polytheistic” (ibid). Others, however, “hold that the reference is to the elemental spirits which the syncretistic religious tendencies of later antiquity associated with the physical elements” (ibid). Under this view, the elemental principles have a demonic source.

We should note that the two understandings are not mutually exclusive because the transcendent powers were so often associated with the physical elements. Greek mythology and Zodiac astrology is a case in point. Each of the twelve constellations is connected to the gods of Olympus in some fashion. As we will further develop below, the Torah describes how the nations associate the heavenly bodies with spiritual beings, and thus they wrongly bow down to, worship, and swear allegiance to the heavenly host (Deuteronomy 4:19; 17:3; Job 31:26-28).

Based on its usage in Galatians and Colossians, most interpret the *stoicheia* as demonic forces and rulers (Esser, 452). Furthermore, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* says that the term *stoicheia tou kosmou* covers “all the things in which man places his trust apart from the living God revealed in Christ; they become his gods, and he becomes their slave” (ibid, 453). Therefore, the false teaching at Colossae was of demonic origin and taught men to trust in these human philosophies and traditions, whether of Greek or Jewish origin, thereby enslaving the Colossians to these “gods.”

In Galatians four, Paul says the Galatian believers were formerly enslaved to these elemental spirits. In Colossians, Paul states that the Colossian heresy is according to these elemental spirits (2:8) and that, in Christ, the Colossians died to the elemental spirits (2:20). Yet in the very same verses, he also attributes the heresy to human tradition. In verse eight, he says the false teaching is according to *both* the elemental spirits and to human tradition. Later in verses 20-21 when he uses the phrase again, Paul says that dying to these spirits should mean that the Colossians no longer live according to human precepts and teachings. The connection between *stoicheia tou kosmou* and human teachings is clear. In our study of [Galatians 4](#), we argue that these elementary principles or spirits refer specifically to the false teachings and traditions of man, which contradict and stand against the Word of God.

As stated above, *stoicheia tou kosmou* is commonly understood to mean transcendent powers controlling the world, or spiritual beings with power. In Colossians two, many translators prefer this understanding and substantiate this view when they render *stoicheia tou kosmou* as “elemental spirits” (see ESV, NIV-11, and NET for a few examples). When Paul relates the human traditions and the

spirits, he shows through Hebrew parallelism that the origin of these human traditions is the demonic elemental spirits.

This idea is so important that it deserves repeating: the Colossian heresy was based on man-made teachings with demonic origin. Its origin is absolutely not from God!

In 2:8, Paul has clearly stated that the false teaching is not according to Christ. He then goes on to say what is according to Christ, that is, what are the riches that the Colossians have in Christ. The Colossian heresy had lost its connection to Christ, yet in Christ is where the fullness of truth is.

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead (2:9–12).

This is why it is so critical that the Colossians not lose connection with Christ. He must be the focal point, the fullness, the Head. Apparently the false teachers at Colossae were advocating that a secret wisdom, knowledge, and fullness of truth was only available through their belief system (Dennis and Grudem, *The ESV Study Bible*, Colossians 2:2), which we remember included the worship of/with angels, and asceticism. Asceticism is rigorous self-denial and abstinence from the pleasures of life. In this text, the Greek word for asceticism literally means “humility,” and Paul is most likely referring to fasting and avoiding the taboos quoted later in verse 21, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” (ibid, Colossians 2:18). As to angel worship, at this time, some taught that people should call on angels for help and protection from evil spirits (ibid).² Asceticism and worship of/with angels would be a means to receiving this angelic assistance. While the Colossians may be trying to avoid demons, Paul points out that in actuality this teaching they hold to is from demons. Instead of submitting to these false beliefs, Paul encourages the Colossians to realize the sufficiency of Christ. That is why Paul stresses that in Christ the fullness of God dwells (1:19, 2:9) and in him we have been filled (2:10). As Dennis and Grudem note concerning 2:10,

In this remarkable statement, Paul affirms that believers share in Christ’s power and authority over every rule and authority by virtue of their union with him. Here is the main theme of Colossians. The divine “fullness” is in Christ (v. 9), and believers are “filled in him.” Hence, they have everything they need in Christ. They do not need any other teaching to become like God. The term head is clearly used here with the sense of “authority over” (see note on 1 Cor. 11:3). This would have been an encouraging and helpful teaching for the Colossians, **who clearly continued to live in fear of the demonic realm** (emphasis ours).

2 There is debate as to whether this should be translated “worship of angels.” Several scholars suggest it is better translated as “worship offered by angels.” Instead of worshipping angels, it is possible that there was a desire to *join in with* the worship that angels offered to God in heaven. Participation in such worship was said to occur through visions in which the person was thought to be transported to the throne room of God (Isa 6; 1 Enoch 14). This was stressed particularly among apocalyptic and mystical groups within first-century Judaism. See Dunn's discussion on page 180-184.

The false teachers said that fullness came through their teaching, but Paul shows the opposite: Without Christ, we are empty. Similarly, in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3), contrasted with the wisdom and knowledge of the false teachers, which is mere human philosophy and empty deceit (2:8).

Colossians 2:13-15

With this context established, we can now examine the verses in question. In verse 13, Paul declares that we who were dead in our sins have been made alive in Christ:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses...

Because of our identification with Christ in his death and resurrection, we too have died and been given new life. All our sins have been forgiven.

Verse 14 in the ESV reads as follows:

by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross (emphasis ours).

There have been numerous attempts to translate the Greek phrases in this passage. O'Brien states that there are some grammatical difficulties in the text, making the application unclear (124). Pauline scholar James Dunn agrees, noting some of the phrases are unclear and awkward (165). Consider some of these additional translations of verse 14:

having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:14 NASB).

having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:14 NIV11).

Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross (Colossians 2:14 KJV).

He has destroyed what was against us, a certificate of indebtedness expressed in decrees opposed to us. He has taken it away by nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:14 NET).

The first phrase in the ESV, “by canceling the record of debt,” comes from the Greek phrase ἐξαλειψας το καθ’ ἡμῶν χειρογραφον (*exaleipsas to kath’ hemon cheirographon*). First, the English word “by” in the ESV is an addition to the text, which serves to connect the end of verse 13 “He forgave us all our sins,” with the beginning of verse 14 “canceling the record of debt,” in a supposed causal relationship. This implied causation, however, is not in the Greek, which is why many of the translations (including

the four listed above) do not include “by,” but rather say “having canceled” (NASB) or “blotting out” (KJV). What we can conclude from verses 13 and 14 is that God 1) forgave us all our sins and 2) cancelled the “certificate of debt” through Christ's work on the cross. We cannot, however, conclude from these verses that number one happened *because of* number two, since there is nothing in the Greek text that denotes this causation. The significance of this will become apparent below.

Second, let's look at some of the Greek words that we *do* find in the text. The first is *exaleipas* and literally means to cause to disappear by wiping, and, in the case of Colossians 2:14, carries the sense of “to remove so as to leave no trace” (BDAG, 344). What has been wiped away and obliterated? The Greek word here is *cheirographon*, which is used only once in scripture, here in Colossians 2:14. It is a complex term with much debate about its usage in this text. It literally means “a hand-written document” (BDAG, 1083), which is why the KJV above translates it as “handwriting.” How then do some translations arrive at “certificate of debt” or “indebtedness”? O'Brien states that *cheirographon* denotes “a note of indebtedness' written in one's own hand as a proof of obligation” and says this understanding is historically attested in both Jewish and Greco-Roman sources (124). It is a legal term in which the debtor admitted his debt to the creditor by writing in his own hand the equivalent of an IOU (ibid, 125). For example, we see *cheirographon* being used this way in extra-biblical sources such as the Book of Tobit, found in the Septuagint (see 5:1-3; 9:1-5).

In Colossians 2:14, *cheirographon* is part of the phrase “*cheirographon tois dogmasin*.” *Dogma* (the dictionary form of *dogmasin*) means rules, regulations, decrees, or ordinances (BDAG, 254), and thus a simple rendering of the text is “handwriting of requirements” (NKJV) or “handwriting of ordinances” (KJV). In verse 14, Paul is saying that the handwriting of requirements that opposed us (*hupenantios*) has been taken out of the way and nailed to the cross.

The question is, What are the *cheirographon tois dogmasin* that have been nailed to the cross? Some claim the handwriting of regulations refers to the Mosaic Law, to the Torah. If this is true, then one would be completely justified in saying that Paul taught we are free to disobey the law. Under this interpretation, the Torah has been nailed to the cross. It is dead, and therefore, no longer binding.

There is, however, an immediate problem with this interpretation. It suggests that the law is against us, yet this does not harmonize with clear teachings elsewhere in scripture. A cursory glance at Psalm 119 shows the law brings delight, counsel, life, light, truth, and freedom. What is against us is our own flesh, our sinful desire, which results in our breaking God's law (Romans 7:11-14). What is against us is man-made traditions that cause us to turn away from the truth of God's Word (Colossians 2:8; Mark 7). In order to experience the freedom and blessing of God's law, we need these opposing factors removed.

Furthermore, according to most Evangelical Christian scholars, the Greek does not imply that *cheirographon* refers to God's law. In fact, the law is not once mentioned in the entire book of Colossians. Remember that *cheirographon* is historically used to refer to a legal document in which

one admits and writes his debt to another. This is why many scholars translate *cheirographon* not simply as handwriting, but rather as a record or certificate of debt (see ESV, NASB, and NET translations above for a few examples). The common academic interpretation, then, is that *cheirographon* is not the law, but rather a record of our sin, of our law-breaking, and that this has been nailed to the cross. As O'Brien says,

Our preference is to understand χειρόγραφον as the signed acknowledgment of our indebtedness before God. Like an IOU it contained penalty clauses (see Job 5:3; Philemon 19). The Jews had contracted to obey the law, and in their case the penalty for breach of this contract meant death (Deuteronomy 27:14–26; 30:15–20). Paul assumes that the Gentiles were committed, through their consciences, to a similar obligation, to the moral law in as much as they understood it (cf Romans 2:14, 15). Since the obligation had not been discharged by either group the “bond” remained against us (125).

Under this interpretation, *dogma* refers to the specific commandments or ordinances of the law that specify what was transgressed. However, it is not the *dogma* but the *cheirographon* that has been nailed to the cross. Consider what Dunn says in reference to this verse:

The expunging of the record confirms that none of these transgressions is any longer held 'against us.' **This does not mean, however, that the underlying decrees or regulations cease to have force, that is that the law no longer functions as God's yardstick of right and judgment;** there is no contradiction here with Rom. 2:12-16. It is simply that the record of the transgression has been erased—another way of saying, 'he forgave us all our transgressions' ... Once again we should just note that **it is not the law which is thought of as thus destroyed, but rather its particular condemnation (χειρόγραφον) of transgressions**, absorbed in the sacrificial death of the Christ (166, emphasis ours).

Therefore, according to the Evangelical academic opinion, Colossians 2:14 does not support the idea that the law has been taken out of the way and nailed to the cross. Rather, it is commonly understood that the record of our debt/sin (our law-breaking) has been removed.

However, there is a third interpretation that we must also consider in light of the word *dogma*. As stated above, *dogma* means rules, regulations, decrees, or ordinances. In Colossians 2:14, as well as in Ephesians 2:15, *dogma* is commonly thought to refer to the Mosaic Law. However, there are significant problems with this understanding:

1. **Its biblical and historical usage:**

Every other time *dogma* is used in the New Testament (Luke 2:1, Acts 16:4, and 17:7), it refers to a decree made by a person or group of people, not to God's laws. *Dogma* is also used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament), and non-biblical contemporary sources (e.g. the writings of Josephus). In the majority of these instances, *dogma* refers to decrees made by men. In a few occurrences, *dogma* may refer to God's commands (e.g. Josephus' usage in *Against Apion* 1.8; 4 *Maccabees* 10:2), though it is certainly not the normal usage of this word.

Now perhaps one could argue that in Colossians Paul decides to use *dogma* in an uncustomary way, to refer to God's law. While this would be inconsistent with the general usage, one could concede that it is at least a possibility. However, another problem, even more significant than the historical usage of *dogma*, stands in the way of interpreting this Greek word as God's law:

2. The usage of the related word *dogmatizo* in Colossians 2:20-22:

Just a few verses after Paul's use of *dogma* in 2:14, he says the following:

If with Christ **you died to the elemental spirits of the world**, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you **submit to regulations**— 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used)--**according to human precepts and teachings?** (2:20–22, emphasis ours)

The ESV “submit to regulations” is a translation of the Greek word *δογματίζω* (*dogmatizo*), which is a verb form of the related word *dogma* (a noun). It literally means “to put under obligation by rules or ordinances” (BDAG, 254). Here it is in the passive sense, so it carries the sense of “permit yourselves to be put under” (ibid). Colossians 2:20-22 makes it clear that these regulations the Colossians are submitting to are from man, not God (“according to human precepts and teachings”) and ultimately have their source in the elemental spirits, the demons. Again, these rules, decrees and ordinances that the Colossians were submitting to are not from God! They are decrees of men, inspired by demons. They give additional rules concerning how to earn God's favor. This fits with the historical usage of *dogma* (see "1" above) where the word is used not of God's law but of a decree made by people and of man-made religious tradition.

Consider what O'Brien says about *dogmatizo* in *The Word Biblical Commentary*:

δογματίζω means to 'represent and affirm an opinion or tenet,' 'establish or publish a decree,' 'proclaim an edict' (Kittel, TDNT 2, 231; cf LSJ, 441, and Lohse, 123). **It is akin to δόγμα ('decree,' 'ordinance') used in the plural at chapter 2:14** of the regulations with their penalty clauses associated with the signed acknowledgment of our indebtedness before God. Here the restrictive regulations have particular reference to ordinances of taste and touch (v 21 lists three of them), though we should not suppose that the verb is specifically limited to these. **The passive voice of the verb carries the notion of 'allowing oneself to be' ... so that a literal rendering is 'let yourself be regulated'** (BDF, para. 314; cf 1 Cor 6:7). **The point is that the Colossians were in danger of falling victim to the false teaching and of voluntarily placing themselves under the regulations imposed by these powers** (149, emphasis ours).

If we say *dogma* is equivalent to God's law, then we must also say that *dogmatizo* means to put yourself under obligation to God's law. The obvious problem is that the origin of God's law is not man, nor did the Torah have a demonic source (i.e. the elemental spirits). The Torah had its origin in God. To say it is of human precepts and teachings is to misunderstand from *whom* the law came.

We, therefore, propose a third interpretation of “*cheirographon tois dogmasin*.” Based on the historical usage of these words and the overall context of Colossians, this phrase most likely means the record of indebtedness (*cheirographon*) created when a person voluntarily places himself under the decrees of men (*dogma/dogmasin*), and therefore, under the rule of the elemental spirits. This record, Paul says, has been nailed to the cross. We are no longer slaves to the teachings of men, nor are we in bondage to the elemental spirits of the world (cf. Colossians 2:8, 20; Galatians 4:8-9).

We see an allusion to this in the Torah itself, in Deuteronomy, where we read a somewhat disturbing verse:

And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, **things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven** (Deuteronomy 4:19, emphasis ours).

This verse warns the Israelites not to worship the sun, moon, and stars, and the host of heaven, and appears to state that the LORD gave these things to the nations (non-Israelites) to bow down to and worship.

Compare this to what Paul says in Romans one about those who worshipped false gods:

Therefore God **gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Romans 1:24–25, emphasis ours).

Here in Romans one, Paul explains that God gave these idolators over to the sinful desires of their hearts, allowing them to do what their flesh insisted upon: worship creation instead of the Creator. Likewise, in Deuteronomy, Moses explains that God gave the nations over to this same sinful inclination, and this became their inheritance. Compare this also to Acts 7:42, in which Stephen, referring to the golden calf incident, says,

But God turned away and gave them over to worship **the host of heaven** (emphasis ours).

In this case, it is Israel itself who has been given over to worship the host of heaven. When Israel worshipped the golden calf, they denied their inheritance, God himself, and accepted the inheritance of the nations. Sadly this was repeated throughout Israel's history (see Deuteronomy 32:8-21), as Stephen further documents, citing Amos 5:25-27.

From these passages in Deuteronomy, Romans, and Acts we know that the nations and even Israel had been given over to idolatrous practices, but can we say there was demonic rulership over these nations and practices? We see support for the idea that the nations are under some type of angelic authority in Daniel when Gabriel, who was sent with a message from God to Daniel, says the following:

The **prince of the kingdom of Persia** withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, **one of the chief princes**, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia (Daniel 10:13, emphasis ours).

The prince of Persia is commonly understood to be an evil angelic being who rules over that nation (Grudem, ESV Study Bible commentary on Daniel 10:13). This is consistent with Deuteronomy 4:19, in which God allots to the nations the host of heaven. With this understanding, the demonic being named the prince of Persia would be Persia's "allotment."

After the flood, during the time of the Tower of Babel, mankind rebelled against God. Deuteronomy 32 records how God divided the nations at that time and gave them their inheritance (32:8), which we know from the passages listed above is the host of heaven. God then allowed these nations, who had chosen voluntarily to serve false gods instead of the One True God, to have the created elemental spirits (such as the prince of Persia in Daniel) as their rulers, instead of the Creator. Thus the nations were led by demons, and the demons themselves gave ordinances and decrees (*dogmas*) which the nations voluntarily submitted to, thereby placing themselves into indebtedness (writing the I.O.U., the *cheirographon*) to the elemental spirits.

With the coming of Christ, this note of indebtedness was nailed to the cross. Now those among the nations who respond to the gospel are no longer under the authority of the demons and their decrees, but rather, are under God once again, and thus salvation has been opened to the Gentiles. Furthermore, canceling the debt to the demonic realm paved the way for the ultimate fulfillment after the seventh trumpet:

And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 11:15).

Hallelujah! The *cheirographon* has been cancelled, nailed to the cross! We are no longer under the *dogma* of the demonic rulers and authorities, and one day God will declare that those kingdoms whose former inheritance was the heavenly host now belong to our God and King.

At this point, let us return to the ESV translation of verses 13 and 14:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, **by** canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross (emphasis ours).

Previously, we discussed that the word "by" is an addition by the translators to the text which attempts to connect "forgive us all our trespasses" in a causal relationship with "canceling the record of debt that stood against us." Since the word "by" is not in the text, we cannot conclude that there is a causal relationship between these two phrases; in other words, we cannot say that God forgave us all our sins

by canceling this record of debt. If, as we propose, the *cheirographon* is a record of our voluntary indebtedness to man's decrees, it would not follow that canceling it results in God forgiving us all our trespasses against God and his decrees.

This is not to say that the two phrases are unrelated. Through Christ's death, God 1) forgave us all our sins and 2) cancelled any prior indebtedness we had to man's traditions and the elemental spirits. God had previously allowed men to be enslaved to these spirits (Deuteronomy 4:19; Acts 7:42), but now he has cancelled this debt by nailing it to the cross.

Further, when we indebted ourselves to man's traditions and the elemental spirits, we sinned against God because we exchanged his truth for a lie and worshipped the creation instead of the Creator (Romans 1:25). Through the work of Christ, we have been forgiven for this idolatry.

Therefore, through the cross, God accomplished the following:

- He cancelled our allegiance and indebtedness to falsehood (traditions of man/elemental spirits).
- He forgave us our trespasses, to include (but not limited to) forgiving us for having a prior allegiance to the elemental spirits.

He did not forgive us all our trespasses *by* canceling this allegiance. The cancellation of our indebtedness to the elemental spirits does not cause our sins to be forgiven. That is an additional act of grace. More accurately, God forgave us all our trespasses *and* cancelled this allegiance to falsehood.

For this reason, we prefer translations that do not infer this causal relationship by inserting the word "by." Many translations show relationship without causation, such as the four we listed earlier. For example, in the NASB, verses 13 and 14 read as follows:

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

The result is detailed in Colossians 2:15:

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him (ESV).

With the understanding that "*cheirographon tois dogmasin*" refers to the indebtedness to men and to the elemental spirits that we have put ourselves under, it then follows that the canceling of this debt results in the disarming of these rulers and authorities. We are no longer enslaved to the elemental spirits that inspire the false man-made teachings, and therefore, they are disarmed and without power over us.

Colossians 2:16-17

At this point, we arrive at the following statement in Paul's letter:

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (16-17).

These verses are commonly cited to show that believers in Christ are not obligated to follow the dietary laws and holy days detailed in the Torah. Under this interpretation, the false teachers are judging the Colossians for failing to follow these parts of the law. Paul, therefore encourages the Colossians, saying they should not let the false teachers pass judgment on them for not following these commandments. The reason? Because these laws have been fulfilled in Christ and are no longer needed. Let's examine the passage in context to see if this is a valid interpretation.

What do we know from the text itself? Clearly, there were those among the Colossians who were passing judgment on the Colossian believers, and this judgment had something to do with food, drink, and holy days. Were the false teachers judging the Colossians for keeping the Old Testament dietary laws and holy days? For not keeping these laws? For keeping them in a certain manner, or not keeping them in a certain manner? These are crucial questions.

To begin, we will examine the Greek to gain insight into the text commonly translated “in questions of food and drink.” The Greek phrase is ἐν βρωσει καὶ ἐν ποσει (*en brōsei kai en posei*). *Brosis* (the dictionary form of *brosei*) means the act of partaking of a food, or eating (BDAG, 184). Likewise, *posis* (*posei*) means the act of drinking (BDAG, 855). So we are talking about the *acts* of eating and drinking here, as opposed to specific foods and drinks.

The terms '*brosis*' and '*posis*' describe not (as often inexactly translated) 'food–*broma*' and '*poma*' but the *act* of 'eating and drinking.' Therefore it is not a question, as R.C. H. Lenski points out, 'about proper and improper food and drink, some being clean, others unclean, **but rules about when to eat and to drink and to fast.**' Such dietary restrictions can hardly be traced back to the Levitical law since this does not contemplate an ascetic program but only distinguishes between clean and unclean food. Moreover, the Mosaic law is silent on the subject of drink, except in the case of the Nazarites and Rechabites, who abstained from intoxicants on account of a special vow (Bacchiocchi, 334, emphasis ours).

Contextually, this fits perfectly within Paul's argument. The false teachers were not judging the Colossians for what they were eating (clean versus unclean food) but rather for not following the man-made rules about how and when to eat and not eat.

Similarly, O'Brien notes,

Paul is probably **not referring directly to the OT food laws since the Torah contained no prohibitions respecting drinks**, except in a few special cases ... Rather, these are more **stringent regulations of an ascetic nature** apparently involving the renunciation of animal

flesh and of wine and strong drink, after a Nazirite fashion. They follow from the demand of “severe treatment of the body” (v 23), whereby **abstinence from certain food is required** (v 21; cf 1 Tim 4:3) (O'Brien, 138, emphasis ours).

Remember that the false teachers were ascetics (2:18, 21-23). They were denying their bodies, not indulging in food and drink. They were requiring fasting, as we will see below, on the Sabbath, new moons, and festival days.

Now, with this in mind, consider that the very next phrase introduces the topic of the biblical holy days (festival, new moon, Sabbath). Again, the traditional interpretation is that the Colossians were being judged by the false teachers because the Colossians were not keeping these days. There are a few major problems with this interpretation.

Recall that Paul says the false teachings are from human tradition, are man-made, and have their origin in the elemental spirits (8, 20-23). As we stressed above, the origin of the biblical holy days is God, not man. It would seem, rather, that the false teachers are imposing their own traditions on to what God has commanded. This is similar to Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees:

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples **break the tradition of the elders**? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you **break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition**? For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honor his father.’ **So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.** You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: “‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, **teaching as doctrines the commandments of men**’” (Matthew 15:1–9, emphasis ours).

In this account, the Pharisees asked Jesus why his disciples did not follow the traditions of the elders (note the origin of the traditions). Jesus replied that when the Pharisees keep some of these traditions, they break God's commandments and make his Word void. They act as hypocrites, teaching their man-made rules as if they were from God, and, in certain cases, elevating their own traditions above the Word of God. We know from the context of Colossians that the same thing is happening here. Some men are teaching their own rules and regulations as if they were the very Word of God. They are not teaching that people obey God's laws (like the biblical festivals) but their own laws and rules, modifying what God has said in his Word.

How might the false teachers have been modifying God's instructions for his people? We can gain from the context that it had to do with fasting and other forms of asceticism, as well as worship of angels and an emphasis on receiving visions. What, then, might they have been teaching about the biblical holidays?

Consider that the vast majority of the festivals (with the exception of Yom Kippur) were feast days, not fast days. For example, let's look at what God's Word says about the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles.

You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress. **You shall rejoice in your feast**, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns. For seven days you shall keep the feast to the LORD your God at the place that the LORD will choose, because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, **so that you will be altogether joyful** (Deuteronomy 16:13–15, emphasis ours).

This is not a time of fasting and self-denial. It is the opposite: a time of great rejoicing and feasting, eating and drinking, thanking God for his bountiful provision. The weekly Sabbath is also a time to delight in the Lord and rejoice (Isaiah 58:13-14); we know God does not require fasting on the Sabbath because he provided a double portion of manna on the sixth day so there would be food available on Sabbath (Exodus 16:22-26). The false teachers likely looked down upon the Colossian believers for celebrating with food and drink on these special days instead of practicing the false teachers' own ascetic rules and regulations (the "dogmas" - man-made rules). If Paul is stressing that the Colossians follow what God says and not what man says, then it makes sense that Paul would encourage the Colossians to continue these Biblical holidays according to God's instructions, with feasting and with joy, and not according to man's rules, in fasting and self-denial, in subjugation to the elemental spirits.

O'Brien discusses possible reasons behind fasting in the first-century context:

There are various reasons why abstinence from food and drink was practiced in the ancient world: the belief in the transmigration of souls might prevent a person from eating meat. Some practiced asceticism since it was bound up with their views of purity. Others thought that by fasting one served the deity, came closer to him or prepared oneself for receiving a divine revelation, a point that is important in the light of verse 18 (138).

Many of these reasons line up with the text in Colossians two. For example, we know the false teachers practiced asceticism and had a fascination with visions (2:18). Perhaps one reason they fasted was to receive these visions.

Therefore, along with the above scholars, we conclude that in verse 16 Paul is not talking about food laws and what one should or should not eat. Rather, he is talking about the traditions of man (the *dogmas* from verse 14) that say believers must deny their bodies and fast at certain times in order to properly worship God. The false teachers may have changed God's instructions regarding the holy days from feasting to fasting.

Verse 17 reads as follows:

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

What does Paul call a shadow? Those things listed in verse 16, most specifically the Biblical holy days. These function as shadows because they reveal to us something about Christ. For example, Passover ultimately depicts the sacrifice of our spotless Lamb, Christ himself (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). Likewise, the weekly Sabbath points to the rest we will enter through Christ (Hebrews 4:8-11).

Before we consider the latter part of this verse, let's note one important thing. Verse 17 says that these biblical holy days ARE a shadow of things to come. The Greek word translated "are" is in the present tense. The holy days still continue to act as shadows of the work of Christ, both of what he has accomplished in his first coming (such as Passover) and what he will accomplish in his second coming (the fall festivals, such as Tabernacles). They are active shadows that point to Christ.

What does Paul mean when he says, "the substance [of the shadows] belongs to Christ"? As the ESV translation implies, Paul argues that the Biblical holy days are a shadow but the reality of this shadow is Christ. In other words, Christ is the fulfillment of these shadows.

Hebrews ten says something similar about the entirety of the Torah:

For since **the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities**, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near (Hebrews 10:1, emphasis ours).

The shadow, in and of itself, detached from its body, is empty and meaningless. It is a body which casts a shadow; therefore, without a body, there is no shadow. The writer of Hebrews teaches this concerning the law. If we follow the law but are disconnected from Christ, who fulfills it (i.e. who fills it up with meaning), then we miss the picture that the law portrays. We obey in vain. Paul teaches the same thing to the Colossians. The false teachers were insistent on their way of observing the festivals, yet Paul reminds them that the festivals themselves are shadows. What the Colossians must not lose sight of is Christ.

Just because Christ gives the shadows meaning does not mean that he ends the shadows. Let's consider communion as an example. Communion is a shadow, a symbol, a remembrance of the broken body and spilled blood of our Messiah. We still observe it, even though it is a shadow, because we understand the reality that it depicts. The same is true of the biblical festivals. The fact that the law is a shadow does not mean it is wrong to follow it. We can rejoice in obeying the instructions that paint a picture of the work of Christ. However, we are in danger if we focus on the shadow and miss the reality that gives the shadow meaning, just as we must not take communion in an unworthy manner (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). We must never lose sight of the reality, of Christ himself. Remember that the false teachers had done that very thing: they had lost connection to the Head, which is Christ (verse 19). Instead, they had an incorrect focus on angelic beings and elemental spirits. O'Brien states,

At Colossae, however, **the sacred days were to be kept for the sake of the "elemental spirits of the universe,"** those astral powers who directed the course of the stars and regulated the order of the calendar. So **Paul is not condemning the use of sacred days or**

seasons as such; it is the **wrong motive** involved when the observance of these days is bound up with the recognition of the elemental spirits (139, emphasis ours).

The false teachers were keeping the festivals with a focus on the elemental spirits. This motive was impacting how they were keeping the festivals, in an ascetic manner, to appease these spirits.

Could it be possible that the false teachers had lost connection with Christ because they modified the shadows with their own traditions? By adding to God's instructions, by creating their own rules and regulations, they changed the instructions that God set forth in his Torah. The Torah points to Christ. If you change it, add to it, or delete it, you lose sight of *whom* it is about. Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew 15:6: "So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God." Their traditions had emptied the Torah of meaning. From this, we can learn an important lesson. We must be careful not to add to or delete from the Torah (Deuteronomy 4:2) because if we modify the shadow to accommodate our own traditions, we obscure the substance, we obscure Christ. This is the same thing the Pharisees did. They obscured the Word of God through their traditions to the point where the Word of God, the Christ, the embodiment of the Torah was standing right before them, and they did not see him.

While some argue that Colossians 2:17 teaches against keeping the Sabbath and the festivals, when we examine the verse in context, we see Paul is not teaching freedom from following God's commands. Rather, Paul is stressing that as we celebrate these special days, we must always keep our focus fixed on Christ, who fills them up with meaning, and we must not become enslaved to man's teachings.

Conclusion

Colossians two is widely cited to support the view that Christians are free from following the Torah, specifically the Sabbath, Biblical festivals and food laws. These laws are considered "legal demands" (*dogmas*) that were nailed to the cross. Therefore, no one can pass judgment on others for their lack of participation in these commands. We have examined this chapter in detail and found little support for this interpretation and application.

Instead, the context of Colossians shows that false teachers have come to the Colossians, stressing certain traditions of men, requiring the Colossian believers to follow these man-made laws. Their origin is not of God, not from the Torah, but rather from the elemental spirits. In other words, these traditions are inspired by demons. Sadly, mankind has been enslaved to these demonic rulers, having voluntarily submitted to their rulership (the *cheirographon* or I.O.U.). However, when Jesus died on the cross, he nailed the *cheirographon* to the cross, canceling the record of debt the elemental spirits held over us. This resulted in the disarming of the rulers and authorities, thereby ending their reign and their dominion, including religious traditions that are contrary to scripture.

Because we are free from the rulers and authorities, we no longer have to submit to their *dogmas*. The

false teachers cannot pass judgment on us for not submitting to their rules regarding the manner in which we keep God's appointments with us (the biblical festivals), nor our feasting and drinking. Instead of submitting to ascetic rules from man, we choose to listen to the Creator's voice, the Word of God, including his Torah.

Man's traditions often come from demonic sources, and these traditions are an attempt to please God through our works or what we think is right. They, therefore, become our gods. What traditions of man do we embrace? What traditions of man do we insist others follow in order to be in right standing with God?

In Colossians two, Paul warns against listening to the voice of man concerning eating and drinking and the festival days. Instead of listening to what man says (and to what the elemental spirits teach), let's listen to the Word of God. What does God say about eating and drinking? What does he say about his festival days, which have past, present and future significance in God's plan of redemption? May we simply follow his instructions and not man's.

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