

Understanding Colossians 2:16

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In general, people do not consider the context of Colossians 2. Verses 4, 8, 18, and 20-23 are rarely, if ever, examined, much less taught and preached on. When you read each of these verses you see that Paul was warning the Colossian Christians to beware of those who would seek to rob them through the following things:

Verse 8

enticing words
philosophy
vain deceit
tradition of men
rudiments of the world

Verse 18

voluntary humility
worshipping of angels
fleshly mind

Verse 20

rudiments of the world
ordinances

Verse 22

commandments and doctrines of men

Please notice that the teachings coming in by men (not brethren) all had to do with things other than the true teachings and doctrines of the Almighty. The men were not going to rob the Colossian Christians by teaching them to observe commandments of Yahweh, but rather the commandments of men.

Colossians 2:9-13

This is why Paul seeks to go into the completeness of their forgiveness in Messiah rather than various human, man-made regulations. The Colossians found their full and total forgiveness in the blood of the Messiah. The men of verses 4, 8, 18, and 22 were not teaching “after Messiah” (Col. 2:8). The Colossian Christians were complete in the Messiah (vs. 10) and should keep in remembrance that He was the head of every rule and authority (vs. 10). It was in the Messiah that they had obtained the circumcision made without hands, by being buried with the Messiah in water immersion (vs. 11-12). Then in verse 13 Paul shows that although these Colossians were dead in their sins, Yeshua the Messiah made them alive by forgiving them of all their trespasses (sins).

Colossians 2:14

Verse 14 should be read keeping in mind verse 13. Verse 13 shows that these Colossians had been forgiven of all trespasses and verse 14 shows them how this took place - by blotting out the handwriting of ordinances which were against them and contrary to them. Consider verse 14 in the *American Standard Version*.

¹⁴having blotted out the bond written in ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us: and he hath taken it out that way, nailing it to the cross...

The translators of this version understood that the underlying Greek term *cheirographon* to be an ancient term which signified a “written agreement” or a “certificate of debt.”¹ This understanding is borne out by other Greek lexicons as well.

G5498 *cheirographon* *kebi-roq'-raf-on* Neuter of a compound of G5495 and G1125; something *hand written* (“*chirograph*”), that is, a *manuscript* (specifically a legal *document* or *bond* (figuratively));—handwriting. [Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance]

G5498 *cheirographon* 1) a handwriting, what one has written by his own hand 2) a note of hand or writing in which one acknowledges that money has either been deposited with him or lent to him by another, to be returned at the appointed time [Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon]

Also consider this excerpt from the book entitled *From Sabbath to Sunday* by Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi, concerning the term *cheirographon* in ancient literature.

Most commentators interpret the *cheirographon* either as the “certificate of indebtedness” resulting from our transgressions or a “book containing the record of sin” used for the condemnation of mankind. Both renderings, which are substantially similar, can be supported from Rabbinic literature and apocalyptic literature. “In Judaism,” as stated by E. Lohse, “the relationship between man and God was often described as that between a debtor and his creditor.” For example a Rabbi said: “When a man sins, God writes down the debt of death. If the man repents, the debt is cancelled (i.e. declared valid).” {Tanhuma Midrash 140b; cf. SB III, p. 628} In the Apocalypse of Elijah is found the description of an angel holding a book, explicitly called a *cheirographon*, in which the sins of the seer are recorded. On the basis of these and similar examples, it is quite obvious that the *cheirographon* is either a “certificate of sin indebtedness” or the “record-book of sins” but not the law of Moses, since the latter, as is wisely pointed out by Weiss, “is not a book of records.”²

Keep in mind that although Dr. Bacchiocchi is giving his comments on the term *cheirographon* here, he does so looking to antiquity to determine the usage and meaning of the word. This is exactly what Greek Lexicons do. Many times it becomes easier to determine the meaning of a particular Greek word in the New Testament by looking to its uses in the Greek Septuagint or even in secular literature where the Greek word occurs. When you do a word study on this particular Greek word we find that it is only used once in the New Testament (Col. 2:14) and is used zero times in the LXX. However, the term *cheirographon* is used twice in the Apocrypha, which although not Scripture, is ancient historical literature. Notice both uses of the word in the Apocrypha.

Tobit 4:20-21/5:1-3 “And now I signify this to thee, that I committed ten talents to Gabael the son of Gabrias at Rages in Media. And fear not, my son that we are made poor: for thou hast much wealth, if thou fear God, and depart from all sin,

¹ Moulton – Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, 1929, pg. 687.

² *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pg. 349-350. The comment made by Dr. Bacchiocchi to Weiss is a comment from Harold Weiss’ “The Law in the Epistle to the Colossians” *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 34 (1972), pg. 294-295. It states the following: “It would seem to me that indeed *cheirographon* is to be interpreted in terms of the context provided by the Apocalypse of Elijah. In it a book containing a record of sin is used for the condemnation of mankind. This would mean that it is not correct to identify the *cheirographon* with the law of Moses, which is not a book of records.”

and do that which is pleasing in His sight. Tobias then answered and said, Father, I will do all things which thou hast commanded me: but how can I receive the money, seeing I know him not? Then he gave him the handwriting (cheirographon), and said unto him, Seek thee a man which may go with thee, and I will give him wages whiles I yet live: and go and receive the money.” [Comments: In this passage, Tobias was to collect money from Gabael, but worried how he would accomplish this, seeing he did not know Gabael. Tobias’ Father then gives Tobias the cheirographon, i.e. written bond/certificate of debt. Tobias could show this to Gabael and receive the money previously lent to him by Tobias’ Father.]

Tobit 9:1-5 “Then Tobias called Raphael, and said unto him, Brother Azarias, take with thee a servant, and two camels, and go to Rages of Media to Gabael, and bring me the money, and bring him to the wedding. For Raguel hath sworn that I shall not depart. But my father counteth the days; and if I tarry long, he will be very sorry. So Raphael went out, and lodged with Gabael, and gave him the handwriting (cheirographon): who brought forth bags which were sealed up, and gave them to him.” [Comments: Here, the cheirographon was given to Gabael, and in turn Gabael gave Raphael money in bags which were sealed.]

So we see that in antiquity this word was indeed used to refer to a debt or bond which was owed. In the context of Colossians 2:13-14 we can clearly and plainly see that it was the written document or bond (debt) which was blotted out. This debt consisted of decrees (ordinances) against us. Each time we committed sin a decree (ordinance) was written down and recorded. This is what the Messiah blotted out and nailed to his tree.

It is also interesting to look at the Greek term *dogma* translated as “ordinances” in Colossians 2:14. This word is used in the LXX in Daniel 3:8, 12 to refer to the *dogma* of Nebuchadnezzar concerning the bowing down to the golden image. It is also used to refer to the *dogma* of Darius (Daniel 2:9) which stated that no one was to pray to any mighty one or man for thirty days, save himself. What this shows is that the word *dogma* does not have to refer to the commandments of Yahweh. We can also look at the Septuagint’s uses of mentioning or sins being blotted out before Yahweh.

Have mercy upon me O God, according to thy great mercy; and according to the multitude of thy compassions blot (*exalipho*) out my transgressions. [Psalm 51:1]

Turn away thy face from my sins, and blot (*exalipho*) out all mine iniquities. [Psalm 51:9]

I, even I, am he that blots (*exalipho*) out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and they sins; and I will not remember them. [Isaiah 43:25]

Notice that in each of these passages the Greek word *exalipho* is used in reference to the blotting out of transgressions. It is not by coincidence that Apostle Paul used the same Greek word when speaking of blotting out the *cheirographon* in Colossians 2:14 – *exalipho*. Peter also used the word *exalipho* in Acts 3:19 when speaking of our sins being blotted out.

Colossians 2:16

The context of the verses before and after verse 16 sheds an entirely different light upon verse 16’s implication. In verse 16 Paul comments on what the men of verses 4, 8, 18, and 22 were polluting. For some reason they were imposing their human regulations on such practices as eating and drinking, as well as holyday, new moon, and Sabbath observance. This proves that the Colossians Christians observed the holydays, new moons, and Sabbaths, but in doing so should not allow any

outsider to attempt to preach to them to incorporate traditions into their observance.

Why should we not allow these false teachers to judge us in regards to these practices? The false teachers may have said that these days were days to just become a glutton and drunkard (eating and drinking, vs. 16). Such would not be pleasing to Yahweh. We read in Proverbs 23:20, “Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh, for the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty...” On the other hand if it was the Judaizers who did not believe in the Messiah that were judging these Colossians Christians, they may have been imposing the feasts, new moons, and Sabbaths, as a means of justification apart from Messiah instead of understanding them as shadows pointing to Messiah and future things to come. Truly, these festivals have *always* been a shadow of things to come, even under the Old Covenant. We need not get caught up in a false understanding of the practices mentioned, but rather believe that Yeshua is our justification and these appointed times all have significant spiritual meanings and are not to be kept by us just going through the motions, i.e. the letter of the law.

Verse 17 is also crucial. It says that these days “...*are* a shadow of things to come...” It does not say these days “...*were* a shadow of things that already came”. There is a big difference.

For instance wouldn't it make a difference if 1 Corinthians 6:11 stated “and such ARE some of you” instead of “and such WERE some of you”? That would imply that the Corinthian Christians were allowed to continue in unrepentant sin. Because of Paul's statement that those days ARE (present tense) shadows of things TO COME it proves that they were still being observed by the New Testament Assembly. They are also still observed by the true New Testament Assembly today.

It is interesting to note briefly that in a kingdom prophecy (Isaiah 66:22-23) we see worship on the Sabbaths and new moons taking place. Isaiah prophecies about the kingdom, and even in the kingdom (new heavens and new earth) their will be such worship. It is thus evident that these days have not been abolished for the Christian Kingdom of Heaven.

Conclusion

Colossians 2:16 has been misinterpreted and will continue to be misinterpreted because people do not read above and below this verse taking it's context into consideration. I urge everyone to diligently consider the context instead of just brushing off the issue.

If the wages of sin is death, (Romans 6:23) and it is a sin to not keep the holydays, new moons and Sabbaths, then Christians should be keeping these commandments. I say this in love, not in hate. Remember, the servant that did not know his Master's will still got beaten with stripes; yes fewer stripes, but still there were stripes (Luke 12:41-48).