

THE HANDWRITING IN THE ORDINANCES

τὸ χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν

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Exegetes are divided on Colossians—what is called the Colossian heresy—is it a Jewish thing or a pagan one? Does Paul support the abrogation of the Covenant and its law? Or is Paul combatting some kind of Gnostic heresy? Below is the passage that contains the “handwriting of ordinances” phrase:

8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. 9 For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. 10 And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: 11 In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: 12 Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with *him* through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. 13 And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; 14 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; 15 *And* having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

If one believes, as I do, that God will never waffle on his Covenant promises (Jer 31:35-37; etc.), then if Paul is saying here that the Covenant is abrogated, this epistle cannot be genuine or else Paul is the heretic. Therefore in defense of Paul it is imperative that we, if we can, honestly interpret this passage as not contra the Covenant. The reference to “philosophy”, the only one in the New Testament, and “the rudiments of the world” both suggest paganism. Philosophy was the province of the Greeks. Verse 18 also seems to speak of Gentile paganism: “Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels...” If the demons are fallen angels then the gods of the pagans are angels (1Cor 10:20; Rev 9:20). The phrase “the rudiments of the world” occurs again in Galatians 4:

1 Now I say, *That* the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; 2 But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. 3 Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world [ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου]: 4 But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, 5 To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. 6 And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. 7 Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

The Seven Occurrences of τό στοιχεῖον

Galatians 4:3 Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world [ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου]:
Galatians 4:9 But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements [τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα], whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?
Colossians 2:8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world [κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου], and not after Christ.
Colossians 2:20 Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world [ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου], why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances,
Hebrews 5:12 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which *be* the first principles of the oracles of God [τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λόγων τοῦ Θεοῦ]; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.
2Peter 3:10-2 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements [στοιχεῖα δὲ] shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. *Seeing* then *that* all these things shall be dissolved, what manner *of persons* ought ye to be in *all* holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements [καὶ στοιχεῖα] shall melt with fervent heat?

Here Paul’s analogy is from particulars in the natural world or cosmos. Even as a child is in bondage to his parents and the elementary principles of nature and society (the cosmos), so the Israelite in the flesh begins more a servant of God than a son. The question is not whether God is still in charge and we should obey him. The point is that, as in the last commandment on the first tablet (Ex 20:12) which is also the first commandment with promise (Eph 6:2), if we honor God as our Father (Eph 4:6) and Jerusalem as our mother (Gal 4:26), then how long will we be granted to live “upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee”? One may be an Israelite in the flesh but still displease God and dishonor Jerusalem—sonship is rather a matter of the spirit than the flesh (Rom 8:14), “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.” And it is the sons of God who are sons of the resurrection (Luke 20:36), Jesus being the firstborn of the same (Col 1:18; Rev 1:5), the firstborn of many brethren (Rom 8:29).

Exactly what then are the first principles of the cosmos [τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου]? Perhaps all the ways of the world, of the society and culture in which we live and die, the physical urges and constraints of our human nature and mortality, the principles of decay and renewal, what we call the laws of nature. As children of God, we are still mortal and affected by all of this, but as another apostle explains (1John 3:2), “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He [God] appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20) and so ought we to live.

Paul returns to the phrase at the end of Colossians 2:

20 Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world [ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου], why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances [δογματίζεσθε],
21 (Touch not; taste not; handle not; 22 Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? 23 Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

Thus “the handwriting of ordinances [τοῖς δόγμασιν] that was against us, which was contrary to us” sounds very much like pagan asceticism. The closest Scripture comes to asceticism is the Nazarite vow in Numbers 6:1–21. John was a Nazarite but Jesus was no ascetic (Mat 11:18-19), “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.”

But then what about Colossians 2:16-17? “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ.” Christians interpret this to mean that nobody should judge you if you don’t keep the Sabbath, because it is but a shadow of the real thing which is Christ. Why can’t it mean the opposite? Let no man judge you for keeping the Sabbath, for if it is a shadow cast by Christ, would not the Christian want to keep it?

And if we want to get technical, we might note that in Paul’s imagery “the body of Christ” is us. He’s already said this in chapter 1 (verse 24), “Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is

the church...” This symbolism takes up much of 1Corinthians 12—thus verse 27: “Now you are *the* body of Christ, and members in particular.”

Are the kosher laws and Sabbaths a shadow cast by us?

Now back to verse 14 and “the handwriting of ordinances”—why that word χειρόγραφον ‘handwriting’? There was no printing in those days—only handwriting. A clue here might be to

τὸ χειρόγραφον
in Tobit

Chapter 5	Chapter 9
1 Tobias then answered and said, Father, I will do all things which thou hast commanded me: 2 But how can I receive the money, seeing I know him not? 3 Then he gave him the handwriting [τὸ χειρόγραφον], and said unto him, Seek thee a man which may go with thee, while I yet live, and I will give him wages: and go and receive the money.	1 Then Tobias called Raphael, and said unto him, 2 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. 3 For Raguel hath sworn that I shall not depart. 4 But my father counteth the days; and if I tarry long, he will be very sorry. 5 So Raphael went out, and lodged with Gabael, and gave him the handwriting [τὸ χειρόγραφον]: who brought forth bags which were sealed up, and gave them to him. 6 And early in the morning they went forth both together, and came to the wedding: and Tobias blessed his wife.

contrast ἀχειροποίητος ‘made without hands’ in verse 11 (“the circumcision made without hands”) and χειρόγραφον ‘handwriting’ in verse 14 (“the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us”). The first implies not of man but of God, the second implies ordinances of man and not of God.

Thayer, based on usage, defines the word to mean what one has written with his own hand, “... specifically, 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 he returned at an appointed time ...;

metaphorically, applied in Colossians 2:14 ... to the Mosaic law, which shews men to be chargeable with offences for which they must pay the penalty.”

ἀρχαὶ καὶ ἐξουσίαι
Principalities and Powers

But is Paul’s handwriting in ordinances really a record of the divine ordinances that we have broken?

Or might the sense in Colossians be in laws/customs that we ourselves have written? The handwriting in them is against us. Is this because we haven’t kept them or because there was something wrong with them to start with? Is it a handwriting of indebtedness in ordinances that we haven’t kept? Or a handwriting of indebtedness in ordinances that we should not have bound ourselves to?

Jesus figuratively nailed these to his cross—how? In verse 10 Jesus is “the head of all principality and power”—again how? Verse 15, “...having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.” Ephesians 6:12 clarifies: “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*.” Jesus triumphed over the rulers of darkness in the spirit realm and was resurrected to be an advocate for us in the same battle that he won. The devil is

1Corinthians 15:24 Then <i>cometh</i> the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power.
Ephesians 1:21 Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come:
Ephesians 3:10 To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly <i>places</i> might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,
Ephesians 6:12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high <i>places</i> .
Colossians 1:16, “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether <i>they be</i> thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:
Colossians 2:10 And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:
Titus 3:1 Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work,

“the accuser of our brethren”—the prosecuting attorney—now we have an advocate for our side.

Either interpretation fits. When the prosecuting attorney brings out the record of our sins, Jesus goes to bat for us. Alternatively, when the Adversary points to the laws and customs we have signed on to and sinned thereby, Jesus is there to defend us.

Now let us recall Ezekiel 20:

24 Because they had not executed my judgments, but had despised my statutes, and had polluted my sabbaths, and their eyes were after their fathers' idols. 25 Wherefore I gave them also statutes *that were* not good, and judgments whereby they should not live; 26 And I polluted them in their own gifts, in that they caused to pass through *the fire* all that openeth the womb, that I might make them desolate, to the end that they might know that I *am* the LORD.

Their own gifts (verse 26), the sages say, were their own children (Psalms 127:3) that they sacrificed as gifts to their conception of God (Ezek 20:31), “For when ye offer your gifts, when ye make your sons to pass through the fire, ye pollute yourselves with all your idols, even unto this day: and shall I be enquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I will not be enquired of by you.” These statutes and judgments that were not good definitely were not the handwriting of God—as were *the the Ten Commandments* (Ex 31:18; Dt 9:10); rather God gave Israel over to ordinances of their own devising or “handwriting”—ordinances that even demanded they murder their own children. These were far more demanding than the kosher laws and Sabbaths.

And do we not see the process at work today? As our nation tosses aside all biblically based ethics we see it being given over to ordinances that are not good, that—as Paul says—are against us. Who will cancel the handwriting of indebtedness in those ordinances?

There is a similar analogy with a difference in Ephesians 2 (ask me if you want my article on this passage):

11 Wherefore remember, that ye *being* in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; 12 That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: 13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition *between us*; 15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, *even* the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances [τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν]; for to make in himself of twain one new man, *so* making peace; 16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: 17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. 18 For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.

The difference here, if you will, is Israel’s split into two houses. The house of Israel was divorced from the Covenant (Jer 3:8), and in its eventual redemption (Is 11; Jer 31; Ezek 37; Hos 1:11) will be reunited with the house of Judah and thus together they will become “one new man”. Is not this reminiscent of Ezekiel 37:19? “Say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which *is* in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his fellows, and will put them with him, *even* with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they shall be one in mine hand.”

Paul, however, is not counseling the Gentiles to enter the Covenant (Gal 5:2), “Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.” Rather Gentiles can become spiritual children of the covenant—children of God (Eph 4:6) and of the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal 4:26). In that sense (Gal 3:28), “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” But of course the Covenant remains and there is still—after nearly two millennia—a distinction between Jew and Gentile, just as there is an eternal difference between male and female.

Not all can or should enter the Covenant that constitutes God’s wife, but the good news of the Kingdom of God is that all who are willing can become children of that marriage Covenant. It says (John 3:16), “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It does not say that God so loved the world that all may enter the Covenant. Just because one is in the Covenant does not guarantee eternal life. For that one must become a son of God.

Jesus said (Mat 15:24), “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Yet before his death he only had preached to the house of Judah. As it says (John 1:11), “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” He came to his own home [house of Israel]—the neuter εἰς τὰ ἴδια as in John 19:27, “And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own *home* [εἰς τὰ ἴδια].” The second clause has the masculine οἱ ἴδιοι ‘his own’—his own people. Thus Ellicott: “The world knew Him not, and He came to His own, and they despised Him!”

He would take up his mission to the lost house at the right hand of the Father (Psalm 80:14-19; Genesis 48:19). Paul must have known this. For Jesus had also said (John 6:44), “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.” And who would the Father draw? The lost sheep of the house of Israel—thusly God speaking in the prophetic past (Jer 31:3), “Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.” Jesus said, “...and I will raise him up at the last day.” That means that those the Father has drawn during these past two millennia will not be part of the physical restoration described in Jeremiah 31:1-30—rather they will take part in the first resurrection mentioned in Revelation 20.

Paul preached to the righteous Gentiles who attended the synagogues of the Jewish Diaspora. Were they the lost sheep that God was drawing? How would he know? What Paul had to know was that the Olivet prophecy would come to pass and that shortly the house of Judah would begin its long exile. The offer at that time, therefore, was not in this life to enter the Covenant, but rather to assist Jesus as a mediator of that Covenant “in the dispensation of the fulness of times” (Eph 1:10).