

Colossians 2:16-23

“The Sabbath, Appointed Times, and Eating in Association with the Colossian False Teaching”

“Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Messiah. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. If you have died with Messiah to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all *refer* to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

2:16¹ Every Messianic Believer (Jewish or not) at one point in his or her faith experience has been quoted Colossians 2:16-17, often by a well-meaning Christian friend or family member who wonders why we attend worship services on Saturday (*Shabbat*), remember special times of year like Passover, or abstain from pork and shellfish. Too many of our Christian brethren, by us simply doing these things and not necessarily saying anything about them, think that we are judging them for not being similarly convicted. So, they quote Colossians 2:16-17 and do not accept this “judgment.”² Almost every time, Colossians 2:16-17 is taken out of context from the larger message seen in the surrounding verses and the actual issues Paul is having to address in his letter.

What has the Apostle Paul just said before referring to things like eating, drinking, a festival, the New Moon, or the Sabbath? He has just said that via Yeshua’s sacrifice, the “certificate of debt” or the penalties of Torah violation have been erased (v. 14),³ and that through Yeshua the cosmic powers have been disarmed (v. 15).⁴ Now, Paul can move forward with some important elaboration on the false teaching circulating in Colossae. The identity of the false teachers is again described as *Mē...tis* (Μη...τις) or “no one,” only adding to the fact that we need to read his statements very carefully.

When Paul says, “do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day” (NIV), it is difficult to avoid how the Colossians were being, or would be, judged for their relationship to various aspects of the Torah. Many Christian lay readers simply conclude that the false

¹ This section has been adapted from the commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic* (2010) by J.K. McKee.

² This is not to say that there are not Messianic people out there who harshly condemn Christians who do not observe *Shabbat*, the appointed times, or eat kosher. There are, and they have frequently brought a great deal of discredit to our faith community.

³ “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).

⁴ “When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (Colossians 2:15).

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teachers in Colossae were judging Paul's readers for not observing these various rituals. But is there more to consider? Should we not wonder what role or significance these religious practices had as a part of the false philosophy, before deciding that Paul says that all people should not be remembering these things any more?

We need to remember how in the past, Colossians 2:16 would often be quoted to Christians who observed a rigid Sunday Sabbath. But today, very few Christians even care about a Sunday Sabbath. Too frequently, Colossians 2:16 is turned on its head by those quoting it, who feel they are somehow being judged by the actions of a Messianic Believer who says nothing about his or her faith practice, to then judge the person supposedly passing judgment! F.F. Bruce takes the view, "Had the lesson [taught by this verse] been kept in mind in post-apostolic generations, there might have been less friction than there was in the church over the divergent calculations of the date of Easter (whether during the quartodeciman controversy or later)."⁵ There will be some Christians today, who may not think that some of the things of Torah that we Messianics are convicted about, are important for them. Yet, they will consider them individual issues of conscience, left for a person who chooses to follow them to work through them in his or her relationship with God.⁶ **Unfortunately, though, this includes too few people.** Many of the Christian family and friends you have will take Colossians 2:16 and inappropriately use it to judge *you* for your obedience to God's commandments.

It is difficult for many to even consider *the possibility* that in instructing the Colossians not to accept judgment in regard to various aspects of the Torah—the judgment spoken of may relate *to something other* than "the Colossians not keeping the Jewish law." In telling the Colossians not to be judged according to eating, drinking, a Sabbath day, or a festival, we should all be agreed that this relates to the false teachers (and/or any pagan Greeks in Colossae) judging the Colossian Believers. But rather than the Colossians being judged for not keeping these things, is it at all possible that the Colossians were told not to accept judgment for not keeping these things in the manner that the false teachers did? If so, **this would make things like kosher eating, the appointed times, and the Sabbath *mainline practices* of the Colossian Believers living in accordance with God's Word.** This would be in alignment with how James the Just anticipated that the non-Jews coming to faith would access the local synagogue and learn the Torah (Acts 15:19-21), and accept it at a steady and gradual pace as a part of their maturation in faith, in accordance with "the words of the Prophets" taking shape (Acts 15:15ff; cf. Amos 9:11-12, etc.).⁷ *Let us see where the evidence takes us.*

Why does Paul say that the Colossians are not to accept judgment "in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day"? Is it because these things have been abolished by the work of Yeshua? (The previous reference in Colossians 2:14 only speaks of the penalties of the Torah being remitted—not God's expectations of how His people are to live.) Or, were these things being connected by the false teachers to

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 115.

The Quartodeciman issue is explored in more detail in the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 114.

⁷ For a further discussion, consult the commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

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their “philosophy and empty deception...to the elementary principles of the world” (v. 9)? Douglas J. Moo points out how, “On the whole...it seems best to view the practices in v. 16 as basically Jewish in origin and perhaps even orientation while still recognizing that they have been taken up into a larger mix of religious ideas and practices.”⁸

It is not difficult to see that there are *more* than just Torah-prescribed practices listed by Paul: *en brōsei kai en posei ē en merei heortēs ē neomēnias ē sabbatōn* (ἐν βρώσει καὶ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νεομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων), “in eating or in drinking, or in respect of a feast, or of a new moon, or of sabbaths” (YLT). Only a few aspects of Torah observance feature prominently in the false teachers’ philosophy. Also, do note how the first practices listed are food **and** drink—an important clue that ascetic issues are principally at work. The Torah says very little about drinking alcohol, and by no means prohibits it as a part of daily life. Abstaining from alcohol only affected those taking a Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:3), or priests ministering in the Tabernacle (Leviticus 10:9), but not the normal person having wine with a meal. The fact that the Torah says almost nothing about drinking alcohol, should clue us in **to the issue in Colossae being a bit different than just standard Jewish observances**. Noting how drinking alcohol has been thrown into the mix of observances that the Colossians are not to take judgment by, Moo details,

“We should therefore at least keep open the possibility that the Colossian false teachers’ abstinence from food and drink had its origins elsewhere, since many ancient Greco-Roman philosophical and religious traditions also featured prohibitions of meat and wine.”⁹

Ben Witherington III, significantly clouded by an anti-Torah bias, has to immediately discount the possibility that the issue in v. 16 is not doing the things *in the manner* that the false teachers were doing: “It is evading the point to say that Paul meant that believers no longer keep the Sabbath in the way that the false teachers were suggesting.”¹⁰ Yet in having to say this, he at least has to recognize that it is not totally far-fetched to suggest that *how to* keep things like the Sabbath, appointed times, or kosher could be a way of interpreting the passage—and Paul tells the Colossians not to accept judgment for doing these things differently than the false teachers.

Andrew T. Lincoln’s conclusions about the false philosophy, and how various Torah practices may have played a role, are quite intriguing:

“[T]here is no indication here that the motivation for abstinence from food and drink was due to observance of Torah. . . .There is no hint that such special days are being observed because of the desire to obey Torah as such or because keeping them was a special mark of Jewish identity. Instead, it is probable that in the philosophy they were linked to a desire to please the cosmic powers.”¹¹

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 221.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁰ Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 160.

¹¹ Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Letter to the Colossians,” in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 11:361; cf. Bruce, *Colossians-Philemon-Ephesians*, 114.

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This is a fair explanation of how the statements made in v. 16, connect to v. 15: "When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him." Peter T. O'Brien further describes the kind of significance that the false teachers may have given the observances, Torah-based or otherwise, listed in v. 16:

"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."¹²

Considering these things, **why were the Colossians not to accept judgment?** The false teachers observed things like the Sabbath, or gave the appointed times various esoteric meanings, which were all specifically related to their "self-abasement and...worship of the angels" (v. 18). Who knows what kinds of rituals they performed on the New Moon? Who knows what their Sabbath service would have been like? In encountering the false teachers, Paul tells the Colossians not to take any judgment from any person they may encounter—as within the false philosophy these rituals of Torah were hijacked and used in an effort to appeal to the cosmic powers Yeshua was superior over and had disarmed (v. 15). Sabbath observance for the sake of simple rest, or keeping the appointed times to remember God's works of salvation history, **is not the issue.** O'Brien continues, astutely concluding,

"For Israel the keeping of these holy days was evidence of obedience to God's law and a sign of her election among the nations. 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 relegated 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."¹³

Moo also makes some important observations:

"Only Sabbath observance that is connected inappropriately to a wider religious viewpoint is here being condemned. These interpreters [who agree] are quite right to emphasize the importance of interpreting contextually and historically. And they are also right, we have suggested, to argue that Sabbath was taken up into a larger, syncretistic mix."¹⁴

While interpreters like O'Brien correctly read the issue in v. 16 in relation to how various Torah-based practices were being inappropriately used—as a part of the false philosophy to appease the cosmic powers—we should not be surprised to know that not all Colossians' commentators feel this way. N.T. Wright considers the Torah-based practices listed to be things that excluded outsiders from God's people, only to be kept by the Jews for a time, and by necessity they had to be removed with the expense of the

¹² Peter T. O'Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon*, Vol. 44 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 138.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴ Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 221.

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gospel among the nations.¹⁵ But far be it from Wright wanting to encourage any kind of anti-Semitism, as though things like the Sabbath or dietary laws have never possessed any value, he is correct to assert, “what Paul does *not* say in opposition. . . here, or in Galatians, [is] that Christianity has nothing to do with Judaism. . . [as] it would have cut off the branch upon which his whole argument rests, namely, the belief that Christianity is the *fulfillment* of Judaism.”¹⁶

From this point of view, the Torah-based practices listed by Paul should certainly be studied as they will teach us things about who God is and His previous plan for Ancient Israel, but they belong to a prior order. Unfortunately, even when emphasized this way—with respect encouraged for Judaism—many of today’s standard Christian people do not bother studying the Torah even as Biblical history, too frequently consigning it to the dustbin of the past.

You need to remember that there is often a difference between the Christian layperson who takes snippets from v. 16, and the pastor or teacher who is engaged with properly applying Paul’s words and who is sincerely concerned with showing tolerance and love for people of different points of view (Ephesians 4:2-3). Donald Guthrie’s observations are, “In view of Christ’s triumph over all spiritual adversaries, it would be foolish to allow anyone to pass judgment over matters as *food* and *festivals*.” His conclusion is, “Paul is here referring to any system which makes salvation dependent on the observance of certain food taboos or rigid adherence to the observance of certain days as sacred.”¹⁷

Certainly for the false teachers of Colossae, unless one followed their philosophy and its emphasis on certain Torah practices, one was not considered enlightened, spiritual, or perhaps even “saved.” Today’s Messianic Believers should not give similar significance to things like the Sabbath or appointed times. They teach us about God’s plan of redemption, **but they do not provide redemption.** Keeping these things is not to make us arrogant in our interactions with our fellow brothers and sisters in evangelical Christianity, who do not keep them (at present).

When understanding the strong likelihood of Paul instructing the Colossians to not allow themselves be judged not for failing to keep things like the Sabbath or appointed times, but rather for *how* they were not observed in the same manner as the false teachers—contemporary examples of how these things are misused by various people in today’s Messianic community can certainly be considered. Is the *Shabbat* service a place to come together as fellow brothers and sisters, praise the Lord with song and liturgy, and be instructed from the Word? Or is it a time to beat others who are not “doing it the way we are”? Are there any syncretistic elements observed during *Shabbat* or the *moedim* that are designed to appease the elemental spirits (v. 8), which you may have seen or heard of? If so, what is the attitude of those who practice them toward those who do not? If there has been any negativity issued, **Paul’s word is to not accept their judgment.**

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Donald Guthrie, “Colossians,” in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1148.

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When understood in light of Paul's overall message and warning in his letter, his message in v. 16 is for the Colossians not to take judgment in what they did with eating, drinking, the appointed times, New Moon, or Sabbath by the false teachers. These things had a significance for the false teachers, which was contrary to the significance they were to have for those who were faithful to the gospel and to Messiah Yeshua. They were normative practices of faith for God's people, not abolished, but kept improperly by the Colossian errorists.

2:17a So what did the Colossian errorists think about various Torah-based practices, and what would Paul consider to be a proper emphasis of them as a standard part of one's faith experience? What he instructs to his audience is, "These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ" (RSV). V. 17 is seldom quoted by our Christian family and friends, who specifically protest Messianics remembering the Sabbath, appointed times, and kosher, with consideration for the wider issues of the epistle. And also, not enough are aware that there can be some translation issues when v. 17 is brought into English.

The *NIV Study Bible* is about as far as many Christian laypeople go in examining the meaning of v. 17. Its brief commentary describes, "The ceremonial laws of the OT are here referred to as shadows. . .because they symbolically depicted the coming of Christ; so any insistence on the observance of such ceremonies is a failure to recognize that their fulfillment has already taken place."¹⁸ Today's Messianics do agree that the practices listed in v. 16, particularly things like the Sabbath and appointed times, teach us important lessons about the Messiah. They teach us about His First *and* His Second Coming, including the Millennium and the eternal rest to come. But in this brief commentary, many Christians will read it not just as "observance of such ceremonies..." **but also** "study of such ceremonies..." Furthermore, if our goal as mature Believers who study the Word is to see how Yeshua has *and will* prophetically fulfill things like the appointed times, how can remembering them—in such an effort to learn—actually subtract from recognizing God's plan of salvation history? Could we not actually appreciate our salvation in Yeshua more *by celebrating* things like the Passover, or even by remembering the rest to come by participating in a weekly rest on *Shabbat*?

In all fairness to the *NIV Study Bible*, its remarks do go on to say, "This. . .was combined with a rigid asceticism,"¹⁹ but not enough people will recognize the circumstances requiring Paul to use terms like "shadow" and "substance." To them, asceticism might as well just be "legalism."

The role that various Torah-based practices (v. 16) played, in the false philosophy of the errorists, was to help them appeal to various supernatural forces (v. 18) over which Yeshua triumphed (v. 15). Losing sight of Yeshua as the true mystery (Colossians 1:27), in their observance of those practices, **all they could grasp at would be shadows**. In classical Greek thought, *skia* (σκιά) often "means 'shadow' in contrast to 'reality' and denotes the worthlessness of things" (*TDNT*).²⁰ Plato uses it in his image of the cave, describing how the real substance of people is found in their ideas, and not in the shadows

¹⁸ Kenneth L. Barker, ed., et. al., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1856.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ S. Schulz, "*skia*," in *TDNT*, 1044.

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that they cast on the wall (*Republic* 514a-518b).²¹ While Platonic usage of *skia* could be considered, as the “shadow” the Colossian false teachers were reaching toward, in their misuse of various Torah-based practices, would be worthless—Paul’s usage of the term is likely not taken from Plato.

What would seem more likely is a usage of *skia* concurrent with what we see in Philo. This is where “God’s works are *skia* but move us toward the reality...The world of *skia* is finally related to that of *sōma* as semblance is to substance” (*TDNT*).²² In Philo, we see the sentiment expressed, “the former fashions shadows only, like painters do, in which it is not right to form any living thing. For the very name Bezeleel is interpreted to mean, ‘working in shadows.’ But Moses does not make shadows, but the task is assigned to him of forming the archetypal natures of things themselves” (*Concerning Noah’s Work as a Planter* 27).²³ From this point of view, even though Bezalel made the various pieces of Tabernacle furniture (Exodus 31:2-3; Hebrews 9:23), these were only shadows when compared to the Divine substance of the Torah that Moses was responsible for conveying. Both have value to be sure, but the shadow sits as a representation of something much more significant.

Yet what is the substance that Plato, or even Philo, would be looking for? A higher plane of consciousness? More insight into God’s wisdom?

It is actually not difficult to see how this all relates to the false teachers in Colossae. It is not as though the Torah-based practices have no value (v. 6). *They actually have great value for God’s people that should be appreciated.* But, without understanding the substance to which they point, they might not mean as much as they should for those who practice them. James D.G. Dunn indicates, “In contrast to Platonic-Philonic thought, it is the Christ in all the concrete bloodiness of the cross who is the true reality.”²⁴ Roger Bullard says, “Dietary laws and calendrical observances point beyond themselves to Christ, the reality.”²⁵ Just consider how when we as Messianic Believers gather to celebrate the Biblical holidays, we gather to not only remember the events they commemorate in the Torah, but also what they represent to us who believe in Yeshua. We keep these things because they point us to Yeshua, and speak volumes to us about who He is, what He has done, and what He will do for us.

Challenges exist not only for Bible readers having the right, appreciative perspective toward the practices of v. 16, but also how v. 17 is rendered in English. The first part of the verse, *ha estin skia tōn mellontōn* (ἃ ἐστιν σκια τῶν μελλόντων), is rendered in YLT as “which are a shadow of the coming things.”²⁶ It is easily detected that *mellontōn* is a present tense active participle—meaning that the Torah-based practices possess a

²¹ Plato: *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 2007), pp 240-245.

²² Schulz, “*skia*,” in *TDNT*, 1044.

²³ Philo Judaeus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 193.

²⁴ James D.G. Dunn, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 177.

²⁵ Roger Bullard, “The Letter of Paul to the Colossians,” in Walter J. Harrelson, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, NRSV (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 2111.

²⁶ Or, “which is(are) a shadow of the coming things” (Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort, trans., *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament* [Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1990], 702).

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shadow of things still yet to come. But various English translations can unfortunately skew this.

The New American Standard translators took a liberty and placed the word “*mere*” in italics—“a *mere* shadow of what is to come”—meaning that the word was not originally in the Greek text,²⁷ and could have done so in an effort to downplay the significance that the Torah practices of v. 16 actually do possess. This is fairly easy to see for an English reader, because the NASU preface does indicate “**Italics** are used in the text to indicate words which are not found in the original,”²⁸ so terms unnecessarily added can be more easily detected. (Please note that some words in *italics* are necessary, especially where in the source language a “to be” verb has been left out but is understood, but where a strict translation into English would be very choppy.)

Not all English versions use *italics*, though, to indicate words that have been added to a passage. The RSV and NRSV have “These are only a shadow of what is to come,” and few are aware that “only” does not appear in the source text. The ESV, fortunately, started a positive trend by simply having “These are a shadow of the things to come.”²⁹

More problematic than adding “*mere*” or “only” to v. 17a, is how the NIV has actually changed the verb tense: “These are a shadow of the things that were to come.” The NIV might not add “*mere*” or “only,” but *mellontōn* means “things coming.”³⁰ Many people who read the NIV are of the mistaken impression that the various Torah practices of v. 16 have nothing more to teach Believers about God’s plan of redemption, when in fact they do. O’Brien is one commentator who argues that the past tense “were to come” is the best understanding. In his words, “The expression ‘things to come’...does not refer to what lies in the future from the standpoint of the writer...so pointing, for example, to the time of the Second Coming.”³¹ The reason that *mellontōn* has to be translated in the past tense for O’Brien, with *skia* not pointing to anything more to come, is that “then the *σκιά* [*skia*] (‘shadow’) would not have been superseded and the ordinances referred to would retain their importance.”³² O’Brien’s words are actually quite telling here: **if there are still things to come, then *Shabbat*, the appointed times, and even the dietary laws have lessons to teach God’s people today.**

None of us should ever deny the fact that Yeshua the Messiah has already come in prophetic fulfillment of things like the sacrificial requirement of Passover. To a degree, the Torah practices of v. 16 have been “fulfilled,” *but not completely*. A present tense participle like *mellontōn* is changed to the past tense “were to come” to disregard that future things do await the saints. Great substance is certainly found in Yeshua’s sacrifice for us at Golgotha (Calvary), but no one can deny how more redemptive acts are yet to come (Hebrews 9:28). In claiming that things like *Shabbat* or the appointed times have all

²⁷ The word *monos* (μόνος), which can appear “as adverb, *alone, only, merely*” (Thayer, 418), rendered as “*mere*” in Mark 6:8 in the NASU, does not appear in the full Greek source text of Colossians 2:17:

ἡ ἐστὶν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων, τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ (*ha estin skia tōn mellontōn, to de sōma tou Christou*).

²⁸ *NASB Text Edition* (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997), v.

²⁹ This is also followed by *Lattimore*: “These are the shadows of the things to come.”

³⁰ Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 465.

³¹ O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 140.

³² *Ibid.*

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been “fulfilled,” and they possess no more lessons for us to learn about the future of salvation history, has contemporary Christian thought or theology really been aided? Is there absolutely nothing for anyone to learn about the ministry of Yeshua, and the mission He has for His people, by considering the role that the practices listed by Paul in v. 16 can properly play in someone’s life? Remember that the issue in Colossae was their *improper use* as a part of a Gnosticized-Jewish philosophy.

It is sad that many Christians, when you mention things like *Yom Kippur* or the Feast of Tabernacles, have no idea what you are talking about. Too many, because of inappropriate past tense renderings like “were to come,” fail to even attempt to know what the “shadow” is, so that they might understand the “substance.” Consider how prior to salvation, the Torah functions as a person’s rigid tutor or schoolmaster (Galatians 3:24), but once one arrives at salvation, do the principles of God’s Instruction become irrelevant or invalid?³³ Do prophecies from the Tanach or Old Testament, which speak of the Messiah to come, no longer deserve any examination because they are “fulfilled”? Of course not. We appreciate the prior function that the Torah played in showing us the need for redemption, instilling in us principles of holiness, and we study Messianic prophecies to enrich and confirm our understanding of who Yeshua truly is for us!

Similarly, we can each come to God’s place today—and even though they are still shadows—learn about who the Messiah is by honoring the Sabbath, remembering the appointed times, and even eating kosher. Bruce is not incorrect: “Many Jews looked on their festivals and sacred seasons as adumbrations of the messianic age. There are rabbinical texts which treat the Sabbath as a foretaste of that coming time—the time which, for Paul and other Christians, has come already in Christ.”³⁴ It is a very Pauline concept that the age to come is surely to be inaugurated in the lives of God’s people now (Galatians 1:4), but that does not mean that it is inappropriate or even sinful to remember the acts of salvation history that have had to, and will finally, bring us to the Messianic Age with Yeshua physically ruling and reigning over the Earth.

If v. 17a is not read carefully, especially in light of the issues that originally faced the Colossians, than not only do various Torah practices face their end, but a contemporary application in today’s Christendom would actually see most traditions of formal worship abolished. An extremist could grossly misapply Paul’s words and argue that he thinks that all forms of outward worship and “doings” are wrong. Wright, representing a high church Anglican tradition, correctly asserts, Paul “never says that it has nothing to do with material things, even with outward forms of worship and ritual.”³⁵ Yet for some odd reason or another, while high church Christian ritual is acceptable—eucharist and all—for Believers going back to the Jewish rituals of the Apostles of Yeshua would be like going back to a previous age that has nothing more to teach us about redemption. So do we totally let the shadow go? **Or do we appreciate the role of the shadow that much more,** looking forward to *the things to come* in the future?

2:17b By downplaying Yeshua as superior over the elements (vs. 9, 15), all the false teachers could possess would be a *skia* or shadow of the Torah-based practices that

³³ Consult the author’s McHuey Blog post from 13 September, 2009, “A Low Hamartology,” available for access at <<http://mchuey.wordpress.com>>.

³⁴ Bruce, *Colossians-Philemon-Ephesians*, 116.

³⁵ Wright, *Colossians-Philemon*, 120.

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played a role in their philosophy. This is why Paul's statement continues: *to de sōma tou Christou* (τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ), "and the substance [is] of Messiah" (my translation). The *shadow*, that the false teachers only have, is to be contrasted to the *substance* that the Colossian Believers have.

Some think that "but the body...of Christ" (KJV) is a better translation of v. 17b, in that while no outside person is to judge the Colossian Believers about different aspects of the Torah (v. 16), the internal community of faith is allowed to judge them. While it is tempting to conclude that the Body of Messiah is to judge on these matters, this does not really fit the context of what Paul is refuting—with the Colossian false teachers only able to go after shadows with their philosophy of error. (This does not mean, of course, that the Body of Messiah cannot make appropriate *halachic* decisions concerning various issues; it just finds no textual support in v. 17b, unlike a passage such as 1 Corinthians 5:12-13). While *sōma* (σῶμα) can mean "body" as in the Body of Messiah, with *sōma* contrasted to *skia*, it has to mean "**substantive reality, the thing itself, the reality** in imagery of a body that casts a shadow, in contrast to σκιά" (BDAG).³⁶ The issue is, as properly extrapolated by the NEB, "the solid reality is Christ's."

Knowing that the true substance, meaning, or reality of various Torah practices (v. 16) is found in Yeshua the Messiah, it is incumbent upon those who have been transformed by the gospel to, as Dunn says, "embody the same reality."³⁷ The work of Yeshua does not eliminate or disperse the shadow, but rather shows the greater reality that the shadow prefigures or outlines. And even though we know that Yeshua is the substance of things such as the Sabbath, Biblical holidays, and kosher laws—does Yeshua as substance "do away" with the benefits of remembering them? Christians who observe communion with bread and wine are remembering *a shadow* of something that has occurred in the past, right? So if that is not unacceptable, what would be the problem of doing something even more to commemorate Yeshua's atoning work for us, like a Passover *seder* with an emphasis on the Last Supper? Or for that same matter, consider His future work of redemption at *Yom Teruah/Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*?

Evangelical Believers have swelled the Messianic movement in the past two decades (1990s-2000s) precisely because they have taken hold of the important lessons and spiritual significance in things like the Sabbath, Biblical holidays, and kosher eating. They have seen the substance of Yeshua in the weekly day of rest, the Passover *seder*, the giving of the Law and outpouring of the Spirit at *Shavuot*, the blowing of the *shofar* and future resurrection on *Rosh HaShanah*, tabernacling with the Lord at *Sukkot*, and even (although it is extra-Biblical) lighting the *menorah* at *Chanukah*. In eating kosher they have learned how God wishes us to separate holy and unholy things, even in our diet, and how it can benefit our health. These Messianic Believers have not embraced these important aspects of God's Torah to appease the elemental spirits (v. 9) or worship angels (v. 18), **but to do things that Jesus did.**

Things have been made complicated in recent days because the Messianic Jewish movement has become somewhat unwelcoming of non-Jews in their midst. Some of today's Messianic Jewish leaders do not really want Jewish and non-Jewish Believers to

³⁶ BDAG, 984.

³⁷ Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, 177.

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be united as the “one new humanity” (Ephesians 2:15, NRSV/CJB) that Paul desired. They do not see things like *Shabbat* or the appointed times as a part of the spiritual heritage of non-Jewish Believers who have put their trust in the Jewish Messiah. Even David H. Stern’s opinion is, “For Gentiles...[these] Jewish practices are in most cases nothing more than a shadow, insofar as they do not arise out of their own national experience.”³⁸ Some might take such a statement to mean that things like the Exodus really cannot teach anyone who is not Jewish that much about their salvation.

Stern’s exegesis of vs. 16-17 is actually not that much better than your average Christian layperson, as he totally forgets the larger issues that concern the false philosophy of vs. 8-23. He does not even address the role that the Torah-based practices in v. 16 might have played for the Colossian errorists, and that all they had were shadows because they forgot Yeshua (v. 8). He does think, however, that the Torah-based practices *only* have any real significance for Jewish Believers. He actually says that “these shadows are irrelevant to Gentiles, since God did not give these commands to Gentiles, [and] Sha’ul [Paul] urges the Colossians not to bound legalistically to them.”³⁹ From this point of view, Yeshua is only the substance of Judaism’s cultural identity markers. Contrary to this—and with significantly more Biblical support—Yeshua is the climax of the Sabbath, appointed times, kosher laws, **and the focus of further acts of redemption to come.** How Messianic Judaism continues to act toward non-Jewish Believers embracing their Hebraic Roots, and wanting to be a part of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-12; 3:6), will be a continuing issue to monitor in the years to come.

By far, Colossians 2:17b—the substance or reality found in Messiah—has been used to promote the idea that the appointed times speak to a prophetic plan of redemption. Each of the appointed times has specific Messianic importance that either has played itself out via His First Coming, or will play itself out via His Second Coming. While there have been many voices, *both* Messianic *and* Christian, who have taught from this vantage point (and our ministry is no exception), it is notable that this is a trend now going back well over thirty years. Much of it can actually be traced to a short, 31-page booklet in 1979 by the late Zola Levitt, entitled *The Seven Feasts of Israel*. Evangelical Christians seeing “Jesus in the feasts” has probably been the single largest factor contributing to the growth of today’s Messianic movement. With a significant rise of interest by today’s Christians in studying the Old Testament, **it will only get larger.**

If the issue in Colossians 2:16-17 pertains to the errorists’ false philosophy, and their misuse of various Torah practices, then what do we need to take note of so that these same Torah practices *are not misused?*

If we believe that the Sabbath, appointed times, and kosher are still to be followed today, then as Messianic Believers we have to understand that the true meaning or substance of them is found in the Messiah. We honor the Lord every year by observing His appointed times, and by remembering what Yeshua has done for us. The true meaning

³⁸ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 611.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 611-612.

Daniel C. Juster, *Jewish Roots* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1995), pp 130-131 offers a much better Messianic Jewish approach, which does weigh in some place for the Colossian false teaching.

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and fulfillment of the seventh-day Sabbath, the Biblical appointments, and indeed all of the Torah's practices are found in Messiah Yeshua, and the example that He lived for us!

Looking through the list given to us in Leviticus 23, Passover represents Yeshua's sacrifice for our sin and His covering as the perfect Lamb of God. Unleavened Bread represents the hardships and pain He had to endure for us, for *matzah* is flattened bread with "scourges" on it. At Pentecost we remember the Holy Spirit being poured out at the Upper Room, just as the Torah had been given to Ancient Israel. The Feast of Trumpets prophetically represents Yeshua's Second Coming and our gathering to meet Him in the clouds. The Day of Atonement causes us to become somber as we turn to God and are reminded of the future Day of the LORD when Yeshua defeats His enemies at Armageddon. The Feast of Tabernacles encourages us to look forward to the establishment of His Millennial Kingdom on Earth, and it should likewise remind us of the birth of Yeshua who tabernacled among us. *Shemini Atzeret* is a picture of God wanting to spend "one more day" with us and foreshadows eternity with Him.

Also to be considered, and an element worthy of future studies, is how some of the appointed times that have been seemingly "fulfilled" by Yeshua's First Coming, still may teach us some lessons about Yeshua's Second Coming.

The importance of keeping the Lord's appointments for Believers cannot be overstated, because when speaking of the Exodus and events in the wilderness, the Apostle Paul wrote, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). The RSV says that "these things happened to them as a warning." If we find ourselves being the last generation "upon whom the ends of the ages have come," or we at least are nearing that last generation—how are we expected to understand God's redemptive plan for humanity and the end-times if we do not keep the appointments He has specified for us? How are we supposed to properly understand what is to befall Planet Earth?

If we do not keep the appointed times as God has told us, are we liable to misunderstand His prophetic plan for the ages? The "fixed times" (Leviticus 23:3, NJPS) of the Lord tell us when He plans to meet with us, especially regarding the Messiah's Second Coming. By keeping the appointed times and knowing their significance, can concepts such as the any-moment, random pre-tribulation rapture be theologically supported? Or, will we understand that there is a definitive pattern in the set seasons of the God of Israel, that we can only fully understand by keeping, as opposed to just studying, the *moedim*?⁴⁰

My friends, let us properly understand the role that the *shadow* plays in us recognizing the *substance*!

2:18 It is unfortunate that those who quote Colossians 2:16-17, in refutation or condemnation of today's Messianics keeping the Sabbath, appointed times, and kosher,

⁴⁰ Note that while there are many Christian books written on the prophetic significance of the appointed times, almost all of them are written by those *who do not keep them* as a standard element of the praxis of their faith. Should we accept prophetic interpretations related to the *moedim* by those who do not keep them, and hence do not understand them as fully as one who does keep them? What about those who consider these to only be a part of the spiritual heritage of the Jewish people, and not for all of God's people who have placed their trust in the Messiah?

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have very little consideration for the larger context and setting for what is communicated to those in First Century Colossae. The remarks Paul makes about various Torah-based practices and the substance they possess in Messiah Yeshua (vs. 16-17), are sandwiched in-between his assertion that He has disarmed the cosmic powers (v. 15) and that the false teachers are engaged in both self-abasement and some kind of "worship of angels" (v. 18). **Misuse of these Torah practices has to be the issue.** Delighting in the Sabbath as the Scriptures envision it (i.e., Isaiah 58:13-14), for example, is not the issue. Paul is concerned how various Torah-based practices have been caught up in a very worrisome form of asceticism that severely downgraded Yeshua's supremacy over the cosmos.

Why are the Colossian Believers not to take judgment from the false teachers? Paul's instruction is, "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind" (RSV). The delight of the false teachers is not found in the simple rest offered by the Sabbath, but rather *en tapeinophrosunē kai thrēskeia tōn angelōn* (ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων), in "self-mortification and angel worship" (NEB). This is the Colossian error at its worst, that not only perverted God's appointed times, but where people would submit themselves to physical rigor so as to induce visions. O'Brien observes,

"It was Jewish mixed with pagan elements. The angels determined the course of the cosmos and with it man's circumstances. Men submitted to angels in the cult by performing the prescribed acts and by fulfilling the regulations laid down."⁴¹

The instruction Paul has just given (Colossians 2:15-17) relates to how the Colossian Believers are to be on serious guard concerning "what they have seen" (TNIV), a reference to the so-called visions and revelations of the false teachers. All of the things they advocated were designed to give them ecstatic hallucinations. The words of Jeremiah 23:32 could certainly be in view: "'Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams,' declares the LORD, 'and related them and led My people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting; yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit,' declares the LORD." Even Qohelet's word, "For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God" (Ecclesiastes 5:7), may be considered.

Appeals made by people to angels is certainly something that is found in Jewish literature,⁴² with some ancient Jewish sects possessing a rather advanced angelology. The *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* actually notes how "During the Second Temple period and afterward, developed angelologies appear showing interest in angels' names and functions; these functions include revelation (Ezek. 43:13-14; Zech. 1:19; Dan. 8:15-17; 1 Enoch 7-8; 4 Ezra 4:1-2; Rev. 1:1), mediation (1 Enoch 15:2), guarding of the heavens (1 Enoch 71:7-8; 3 Enoch), controlling meteorological phenomena (Jub. 2:2; 1 Enoch 7, 60:22), and making war (LAB 61:5). Because of their important role in the universe, angels are invoked in mystical and magical texts to produce effects such as healing (Test. Sol., Sefer ha-Razim)."⁴³ Any kind of angel worship present in Colossae was

⁴¹ O'Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 143.

⁴² Bruce, *Colossians-Philemon-Ephesians*, 119.

⁴³ "angel worship," in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 36; cf. Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 150-151.

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undoubtedly a pagan import to Judaism. While the Biblical canon does depict angels used as servants of God, superior to human beings, mainline Jews did not worship the angels.

How do you make contact with the angels? How do you pierce the veil of communicating with another dimension? Paul says that the false teachers were advocating *tapeinophrosunē* (ταπεινοφροσύνη), a “lowliness, humility” (LS)⁴⁴ most often related to fasting—or in this case, an extreme fasting. The NASU translation of “self-abasement” is quite appropriate. This is the kind of physical self-torture that would have presumably enabled the false teachers to enter into a trance, whereby they could presumably communicate with the elemental spiritual forces. Seeking to find some contemporary application for the instruction in Colossians 2:18, Lincoln argues,

“The loose network of attitudes and beliefs that is often labeled as ‘new age’ spirituality provides some analogies to the philosophy opposed by Colossians. A wide variety of interests flows into it, including an emphasis on human potential, a fascination with extraterrestrial beings and UFOs, astrology, magic, witchcraft, ecological concerns, and channeling of spirits from the beyond. However, a major aspect of the phenomenon is a syncretistic spirituality that stresses experiences of a transcendence in the attempt to go beyond the limitations of everyday life in the visible world.”⁴⁵

The Apostle Paul was never against having genuine supernatural experiences. As he indeed writes in Romans 8:16, “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.” Yet let us not also forget how the promise of Yeshua the Messiah is something the Father “promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures” (Romans 1:2). The Bereans were those who were “examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Genuine supernatural experiences will be validated by a thorough support from the Word of God, not subjective physical self-abuses that make one feel superior to others, because one has been able to communicate with the angels. And, especially if the angels are just subordinates of the Messiah!

Not all commentators are agreed that the clause *thrēskeia tōn angelōn* (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων) is to be taken as an objective genitive (denoting possession), where “worship of angels” speaks of worship *directed to* the angels in some kind of religious cult. Rather than the Colossians worshipping the angels, *thrēskeia tōn angelōn* should be taken as a subjective genitive, representing the worship that the angels *perform before God*.⁴⁶ Of course, as the author of Hebrews attests, there is an ongoing worship service in Heaven present with myriads of angels and saints who have died in faith awaiting resurrection (Hebrews 12:22-24). It is not impossible to think that the Colossian false teachers may have tried to develop a legalistic discipline of trying to actually access this via some kind of trance—something that goes way beyond recognizing normal worship on Earth as paralleling worship in Heaven.

The fact that a contingent of angels would have been worshiping before God in His Heavenly court, while something testified in Scripture, is certainly a feature of literature like the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Qumran community saw itself participating in the activities of the angels, as it was said, “May you [abide forever] as an Angel of the Presence in the

⁴⁴ LS, 792.

⁴⁵ Lincoln, in *NIB*, 11:636.

⁴⁶ Cf. O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 142-143; Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 179-181.

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holy habitation, to the glory of the God of host[s. May you] serve in the temple of the kingdom of God, ordering destiny with the Angels of the Presence, a society of the *Yahad* [with the Holy Ones] forever, for all the angels of eternity!" (1QSb 4:24-26).⁴⁷

If the Colossian false teachers were simply desiring to minister before God in Heaven, like the angels worship before Him, this still does not get them off the hook for promoting error. Dunn describes, "more to the point here is the evidence of a desire particularly within apocalyptic and mystical circles of first-century Judaism to join in with the worship of angels in heaven."⁴⁸ Ancient error, mysticism, and trying to inappropriately access another dimension would have still been going on without direct worship of angels. Witherington concurs, "Clearly the desire for participation in the heavenly worship of angels is a prominent motif in mystical Judaism of this period,"⁴⁹ giving a number of examples from the Pseudepigrapha to consider:

"And they showed me from a distance the LORD, sitting on his throne. And all the heavenly armies assembled, according to rank, advancing and doing obeisance to the LORD. And then they withdrew and went to their places of joy and merriment, immeasurable light, but gloriously serving him" (2 *Enoch* 20:3-4[A]).⁵⁰

"He enlightened my eyes and my heart to utter psalm, praise, jubilation, thanksgiving, song, glory, majesty, laud, and strength. And when I opened my mouth and sang praises before the throne of glory the holy creatures below the throne of glory and above the throne of glory responded after me, saying, Holy, holy, holy, and Blessed be the glory of the Lord in his dwelling place" (3 *Enoch* 1:12).⁵¹

"Then the other one also, name Amaltheia's Horn, bound on her cord. And her mouth spoke ecstatically in the dialect of those on high, since her heart also was changed, keeping aloof from worldly things. For she spoke in the dialect of the cherubim, glorifying the Master of virtues by exhibiting their splendor. And finally whoever wishes to grasp a trace of 'The Paternal Splendor' will find it written down in 'The Prayers of Amaltheia's Horn'" (*Testament of Job* 50).⁵²

While the Pseudepigrapha includes examples of how people were shown, or attempted to participate, in the activities of angels in the Heavenly realm, perhaps more relevant to the situation in v. 18 are some sentiments expressed in the DSS. Here, we see a Sabbath prayer issued where angels are lauded, and you can tell that the Qumran covenanters could be trying to actually praise the angels themselves, or certainly join into what they were doing:

"Praise [the God of...] you godlike beings of utter holiness; [rejoice] in his divine [kingdom. For He has established] utter holiness among the eternally holy, that they

⁴⁷ Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 149.

⁴⁸ Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 180-181.

⁴⁹ Witherington, *Philemon-Colossians-Ephesians*, 162.

⁵⁰ F.I. Andersen, trans., "2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 135.

⁵¹ P. Alexander, trans., "3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch," in *Ibid.*, pp 256-257.

⁵² Spittler, in *Ibid.*, 866.

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might become for Him priests [of the inner sanctum in His royal temple,] ministers of the Presence in His glorious innermost chamber. In the congregation of all the [wise] godlike beings, [and in the councils of all the] divine [spirits], He has engraved His precepts to govern all spiritual works, and His [glorious] laws [for all the] wise [divine beings], that sage congregation honored by God, those who draw near to knowledge" (4Q400 1.1-6).⁵³

Certainly while the angels form an important part of God's Heavenly host, and the Forces of Light not only serve as God's agents in the universe—but also frequently protect humans without their knowledge—*humans are not to try to find them*. Consider how the author of Hebrews instructs, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). Angels simply appear. Furthermore, similar to how the witch of Endor was able to call up Samuel from Sheol (1 Samuel 28:13-15), **something prohibited in the Torah** (Leviticus 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:11), so would trying to communicate with angelic intermediaries **also be prohibited**.

What do the errors of self-abasement and this "worship of angels" tell us about the false philosophy in Colossae? In Dunn's estimation, "It is quite possible...to envisage a Jewish (or Christian Jewish) synagogue in Colossae, which was influenced by such ideas and which delighted in their worship Sabbath by Sabbath as a participation in the worship of the angels in heaven."⁵⁴ Similar to this, Witherington believes it is justified for us to consider "that the issue is not just participation in heavenly worship through visions but that the errorists are seeking information, revelation from above, wisdom from the heavenly realm. Paul then is undermining their insistence on the need for visionary ascent to receive such revelation and the felt need to participate in angelic worship in order to draw closer to God."⁵⁵

Whether "worship of angels" is viewed as actually worshipping the angels as intermediaries for deliverance, or trying to join in with angels in an attempt to access the Heavenly realm, the false philosophy advocated that it had to be preceded or attended by some kind of physical mortification. This would have gone far beyond simple recognition of the fact that there are angels worshipping before God's throne (Isaiah 6:1-4; Revelation 5:11-13).

While the false philosophy of Colossians can be rightfully applied today in refutation of various mystical and Kabbalistic errors that have errantly influenced sectors of the Messianic community, there is also another application of the "worship of angels" which can hit a little too close to home. Consider the many Messianic conferences where young women dress up in white gowns, and then dance as though they are angelic beings. Sometimes this occurs with mock up Tabernacle/Temple furniture like the Ark of the Covenant. I think that this classifies as a kind of "worship of angels"—trying to join into something that is off limits for humans—and regardless of how popular it is, we do need to seriously reconsider some of the artistic dances that take place in our faith community. Too frequently, whether it is dance or song, the messages conveyed have not been subjected to theological critique.

⁵³ Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 367.

⁵⁴ Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, 181.

⁵⁵ Witherington, *Philemon-Colossians-Ephesians*, 166.

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(Another view of angel worship is that rather than worshipping angels, per se, the Jews of Paul's day spent so much time focusing on the giving of the Torah to them, that their attention was given to the angels who helped deliver it [cf. Galatians 3:19] and this had become a form of idolatry.⁵⁶ But this view makes assumptions about what role the angels actually performed in the giving of the Torah, and can downplay the Torah as Divinely inspired.)

2:19 How did the false teachers of Colossae get to the point where "worship of angels" would even become a facet of their philosophy and/or theology? For Paul, the answer is very simple. **The main error advocated by the false teachers was that they forgot Yeshua as the center of their faith.** He says, "They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (TNIV). Just as Yeshua Himself taught, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Yeshua was certainly forgotten as the center of the faith for the Colossian errorists. They put their spiritual emphasis and motives on other things. But how are we to specifically understand that they have "lost connection with the Head" (NIV)? Is it that they have failed to recognize Yeshua as Divine (Colossians 2:9)? The false teachers in Colossae were certainly looking for means *other than Yeshua* to access the presence of God. In not recognizing Yeshua properly, the false teachers in Colossae were likely going to wither away and die—even though not realizing it—as they were not being nourished from Him. Wright's thoughts are well taken:

"The true test of whether or not one belongs to God's people is neither observance of dietary laws and Jewish festivals, nor the cultivation of super-spiritual experiences, but whether one belongs to Christ, alive with his life."⁵⁷

Today's Messianic movement (at least as to my knowledge) does not have anyone worshipping angels. We might have some people trying to pierce through the inter-dimensional veil and attempting to access realms they have no business accessing, though, often through Jewish Kabbalah and Medieval Jewish writings (that fall well off the scope of ancient religious literature employed in contemporary New Testament scholarship). We certainly do have people who have advocated false theologies and philosophies which deride Yeshua as the Divine Savior, who reigns supreme over all (vs. 8-10). Even while some of the circumstances we face today here and there, may not be exactly the same as they were in Ancient Colossae, they still nevertheless can be very similar. We need to pay more attention to Colossians than we have been.

Another application of Colossians 2:19 to consider, being disconnected from Yeshua as the Head, is how our prime connection and interaction with God occurs through our thoughts. Most of us when we pray, talk to God with silent thoughts expressed in our brain. When we reason with God, either through reading His Word or through meditation with Him, we use our brains. But have you ever had a headache or physical pain that has disrupted the spiritual connection? I know that I have had times, either because of external environmental changes (like the hay fever season or changing barometric

⁵⁶ Wright, *Colossians-Philemon*, 122.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

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pressure) or negative spiritual energies—when my connection to God has been disrupted. Such is the time when we need to just pray for healing, and not concern ourselves with complicated issues of theology or God’s universe. I have not by any means felt “unsaved,” but these are low spiritual times when we encounter a variety of factors that can disrupt communication with God.

2:20 Paul proceeds to ask the Colossians some questions that relate to the various practices advocated by the false teachers, which do indicate that some who will be reading his letter have adopted them, even if in piecemeal. He starts off this section by saying, “If you died with Christ to the elemental forces of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations...?” (HCSB). It is important to recognize what the issue is the Colossians are submitting to *tōn stoicheiōn tou kosmou* (τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου), which the NRSV renders as “the elemental spirits of the universe.” These are things that ultimately do not originate with God.

Too frequently when encountering v. 20, lay readers will focus their attention upon “submit yourself to decrees,” and then assume that God’s commandments in the Torah are being spoken against. Do the elementary principles really compose God’s standard of holiness in the Tanach, or do they compose the false philosophy Paul has warned the Colossians about (v. 8)? How are we to understand the verb *dogmatizō* (δογματίζω), and its relation to the condemning dogmas that have been wiped clean by Yeshua’s sacrifice (v. 14)? Vaughan gives us some clues as to the potential origins of what is warned against:

“Some may have been reenactments of the Mosaic law; others were doubtless prohibitions stemming from pagan asceticism. There is a descending order in the terms, the climax being reached in the last word—i.e., ‘Don’t even touch.’”⁵⁸

A cursory reading of Colossians 2:21 makes it clear that the various things that could have “dogmatized” the Colossians were not that significant so as to nullify their salvation. They were various opinions about ritual purity and/or attaining to the false philosophy that the errorists advocated. The connection with Yeshua nullifying the “certificate of debt,” which had dogmas attendant with the death penalty (v. 14), may simply be that if the death penalty for high crimes in the Torah has been atoned for—then whatever lesser dogmas and opinions the Colossians may be attempted to adopt via the superstitious ideology of the false teachers, have also surely been taken care of by the Lord. A rigid adherence to these insignificant principles, which are ultimately ways of the world, will not bring one spiritual satisfaction if the Messiah has been forgotten. These are principles that belong to “the rulers and authorities” (v. 15) over whom He has triumphed. Moo reminds us,

“...Paul’s claim that the rules involved here are closely related to ‘the elemental forces,’ and that they are ‘worldly’ in orientation (v. 20), also suggests that these Jewish-oriented or –oriented rules have been taken up into a larger and syncretistic religious philosophy.”⁵⁹

2:21 Some examples about the kind of worldly, superstitious principles are given: “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” It is very tempting for readers to conclude that

⁵⁸ Curtis Vaughan, “Colossians,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:207.

⁵⁹ Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 236.

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various aspects of the Torah are specifically being targeted against here, especially regulations that regard touching an unclean person (Leviticus 15; Numbers 19:11-13) or unclean animals/meat (Leviticus 5:2-3; 11). But then again, it may be that the reasoning behind these various superstitious attitudes is not too dissimilar from how Adam and Eve had exaggerated God's original instruction to them (Genesis 2:16-17; 3:3). Certain touching and handling may also be a word against having sexual intercourse. There may be a basis for some of this found in the Torah, but if so it has been stretched beyond the original meaning, and in the false philosophy's case, applied in order for its initiates to access a prohibited spiritual realm. The *NIV Study Bible* is not incorrect to suggest, "These prohibitions seem to carry OT ceremonial laws to the extreme."⁶⁰

Various ancient Jewish regulations do seem to be in view in v. 21, but we cannot assume that these superstitions were unique or exclusive to Judaism. These worldly, elemental principles are tied to the "self-abasement and worship of angels" (v. 18), physical self-torture and attempting to access the realm of angels either by worshipping them or trying to join into their activities. These same kinds of superstitions were also present among the mystery cults of the day, so it is inappropriate to assume an exclusive Jewish context of this.

2:22 According to the Apostle Paul, the superstitions of the false philosophy in Colossae do not have great value for what they attempt to do for people. "These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings" (NIV). They have the capacity to be significantly influential, possessing the appearance of an impressive religious philosophy, promoting some kind of humility, and its adherents perform various physical things that are supposed to make them "spiritual." Yet in spite of what can appear to be positive, the principles advocated are ultimately of human origin: *kata ta entalmata kai didaskalias tōn anthrōpōn* (κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων).

These principles or "commandments" are not considered by Paul to be of Divine origin. Definitely in view is Isaiah's word about "this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned *by rote*" (Isaiah 29:13), something picked up by Yeshua in Mark 7:6-7 in His rebuke of some Pharisees. **The fact that the issue here is human principles enforced as though they are God's commandments often gets overlooked by some readers.** The Apostle Paul recognized the Torah as inspired by God, and considered *its commandments* "holy and righteous and good" (Romans 7:12). Somehow associating God's commandments as only human principles would also seem unthinkable for a disciple of Paul, as Lincoln, who holds to pseudonymous authorship of Colossians, attests, "A Pauline disciple would scarcely have dismissed what, in fact, had been commanded by God in the Torah as merely human commandments."⁶¹

2:23 What value is there in following the superstitious discipline of the false teachers? Paul comments to the Colossians, "These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh" (RSV). According to Paul, their ascetic

⁶⁰ *NIV Study Bible*, 1856.

⁶¹ Lincoln, in *NIB*, 11:634.

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regulations, while giving a veneer of piety to those who practice them, and perhaps even presenting to those who encounter them an aura of spirituality, cannot ultimately curb the temptations of sinful human flesh. In his instruction to Timothy, Paul will later criticize those who practice ascetic regulations that forbid eating meat and marriage (1 Timothy 4:3). Certainly, the physical body of a person should be disciplined (1 Corinthians 9:27), but not at the expense of recognizing that there are good things to benefit from in God's Creation. Qohelet was right to have said,

"Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 9:9).

The claim to fame of later Gnosticism was that what a person did physically did not have any effect spiritually, and vice versa. Did this attitude play a role in the false philosophy circulating in Colossae? To what extent did the false teachers apply their principles "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (v. 21) to all of their conduct? Are these just ad-hoc categories listed by Paul, or do they compose a selective asceticism practiced? Later in Colossians 3:5 some significant fleshly sins are listed. So in saying that their philosophy has "a shew of wisdom" (KJV), might we conclude that it ultimately did not help those who practiced it, as the false teachers would still fall into sin without the aid of Yeshua's transforming power?

The Colossians, who have recognized Yeshua as Lord (Colossians 2:6-7), are not to fall into sin, placing Him at the center of their faith.⁶²

⁶² Some general Messianic thoughts regarding **Colossians 2:16-23**, associating this text with some form of asceticism or (proto-)Gnosticism are seen in Hope Egan, *Holy Cow! Does God Care About What We Eat?* (Shelbyville, TN: Heart of Wisdom, 2012), pp 123-127; Aaron Eby, *Biblically Kosher: A Messianic Jewish Perspective on Kashrut* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2012), pp 47-52.