

## Colossian 2:16; the Feasts of Israel and the Weekly Sabbath:

### *A challenge amongst brothers*

*“So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,” (Col 2:16 - NKJV)*

#### Introduction

An awful lot has been written and debated on the interpretation of Colossians 2:16. There are whole books on this verse and a number of websites devoted exclusively to it as well.

In fact, given the uniqueness of the message in this verse, regardless of what interpretation is made of it, it seems to carry far too much weight, to have far too much impact. If it could be unequivocally shown to be a message that was given a number of times by either just the Apostle Paul or by several of the New Testament writers and/or Yeshua, then it would seem reasonable to give this message, whatever way it is interpreted, such standing and impact.

The demonstration of such repetition appears lacking.

Thus, it would appear that this passage has gained its significance principally from the defense of mainstream Christianity's observance of Sunday as the 'day of rest'. It also appears that this strong defense of Sunday as the 'Lord's Day' has been a fairly recent event perhaps as a result in the growth of Christian groups that have taken to observing the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week, the Saturday.

With the growth of this defense, there has also been a growth in the articulation of the opposing view, the view that this text says nothing about the weekly Sabbath, or alternatively, that it actually encourages the observance of the various Jewish 'markers' such as their Holy Days.

Given the massive amount of commentary on this passage why am I making the effort to add to this debate?

Personal experience has shown this verse to be divisive and that such division can result in the severing of relationships and even to have a significant impact on Christian organizations and fellowships.

While I would not presume to pronounce that I can bring anything new to this debate, I would like to argue that I may bring some clarity and rationality to the debate, at least in the eyes of those who respect my past efforts and my teaching and writing skills.

I also don't expect to necessarily convince any of the correctness of my interpretation of this statement by the Apostle Paul, as despite my best efforts I still have some good friends and brothers who are scholars and well-known Christian authors with whom I share much agreement doctrinally, but who take the opposite view of this verse.

In this article I hope to give an historical overview of the context of this verse, chapter and epistle; to therefore indicate both who the Apostle Paul was writing to and the 'heresy' or error that he was addressing in this specific chapter/section of his epistle. I also hope to make it abundantly clear what his ultimate and simple message was, that is, what behaviour and actions he was strongly encouraging in his readers.

As part of this account, I will also attempt to succinctly address the current situation that the Apostle Paul's message speaks into; how this may therefore impact us today and how I suggest we may respond.

#### **The Historical Setting of Colossians:**

While the authorship of this epistle is questioned somewhat by scholars, there appears to be strong agreement that either Paul, or someone writing on his behalf, composed this letter. The general consensus is that it was composed in 60-61 CE and most likely while Paul was in prison in Rome.

Paul was clearly addressing this epistle to Gentile believers in Colosse<sup>1</sup> - *“most readers were gentile converts ...”* who *“... had once been utterly out of harmony with God, enmeshed in idolatry and slavery to sin, but God had reconciled them to himself-*

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<sup>1</sup> Colosse at the time of this epistle was no longer an important centre. Its inhabitants were mainly Greek colonists and native Phrygians, though there were many Jews living in the area as well. Antiochus the Great (223-187 BCE) had relocated hundreds of Jewish families from Mesopotamia to this region. They seem to have been more liberal or Hellenistic Jews than those in the neighboring province of Galatia to the east.

Col 1:21-22" (Oxford Companion, Metzger p128).

I will try now to discuss and evaluate the relevant phrases in Colossians 2 which are used to try to determine who Paul was speaking against and therefore set the scene for the conclusion of Col 2:16.

Please note that as we are seeking to determine the context and error that Col 2:16 is addressing we cannot use this verse itself to determine this as this would be circular logic and there is also a sense in which to use the clear Judaic references in verse 16 as evidence of the perspective and hence the error, is to incur the logical fallacy of 'affirming the consequent'.<sup>2</sup>

### Colossians 2:

*1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,*

*2 that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ,*

*3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

*4 I say this in order that no one may **delude you with plausible arguments.***

*5 For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.*

*6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,*

*7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*

*8 See to it that no one takes you captive by **philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.***

There are many new words introduced by Paul (or the author on Paul's behalf), so it can be challenging to be certain about these words/terms. The most likely reading though (if not presupposing the answer based on Col 2:16-17, is that 'plausible arguments', 'philosophy and empty deceit' and 'elemental spirits of the world'<sup>3,4</sup>, especially refer to Hellenistic or Greek mindsets, even if pushed by Hellenistic Jews. So we see first here that Paul is arguing against a Greek mindset.

The term 'plausible arguments' is fairly open to interpretation but certainly sounds philosophical rather than someone attempting to speak the word of God.

The term 'philosophy (Strongs #5385) and empty deceit' is much more clear cut. The word 'philosophy' is not found anywhere else in Paul's letters or the New Testament. The use of the word 'philosophers' is found in Acts 17: 17 where it is used to describe some Greek scholars. (Epicurean and Stoic philosophers).

While it is conceivable that Hellenistic Jews in Colosse may have engaged in 'philosophy and empty deceit' as these liberal Jews embraced the culture around them, we can be quite sure that the Apostle Paul cannot have been referring to Judaizers<sup>5</sup> at all, because some researchers and scholars such as Louis Feldman in '*Palestinians & Diaspora Judaism in the First Century*', Christianity & Rabbinic Judaism (1993) state that no rabbis distinguished themselves in philosophy or wrote any treatise in Greek nor did they use any Greek philosophical terms in the talmudic corpus (of the time).

That is, Paul in using the 'philosophy' label could not have meant to identify any Hebraic Jews in Colosse.

The term 'elements' is found in only 5 places in the NT with a similar meaning to here. The others being Col 2:20; Gal 4:3; Gal 4:9 and Heb 5:12. I will discuss the first three of these verses further on, and argue that they are not referring to Judaizers. Hebrews 5:12 though is illuminating.

*Heb 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 (Strongs #4747) of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.*

<sup>2</sup> Surprising it appears to me that a significant number of leading scholars have made this very mistake. This includes Bruce Metzger, James Dunn and FF Bruce. This does not make their conclusions incorrect but does bring them into question.

<sup>3</sup> 'Elements' (Greek word 'stoicheion' - Strong's #4747) – translated variously as rudiments, elemental things, elementary principles.

<sup>4</sup> Clearly this is contentious. James Dunn argues that the term in Col 2:8, "*the elemental spirits of the world*" is a Jewish reference ("*The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: a commentary on the Greek text*" James D. G. Dunn, p150). The problem is that he uses Gal 4:9 as support, yet this passage is clearly addressing Gentiles before they knew God and thus is addressing Greek/pagan mindsets, not Jewish ones.

<sup>5</sup> Marvin Wilson in 'Our Father Abraham' p 25, defines Judaizer as 'Gentile converts to Judaism – those that submitted to the entire Oral and Written Torah (including circumcision)'. A more common usage though is anybody, Jewish or Gentile who submits to Messiah but also expects all believers to be physically circumcised and obey the dietary laws and all the other Jewish 'boundary markers'.

Of the 5 similar uses of this Greek word 'stoicheion' in the NT, the phrase here is not 'elements of the world' or 'elemental spirits of the world' or 'principles of the world' but 'first principles of the oracles of God'. Thus it appears that when Paul wishes to use this word/term to refer to Torah or to some part of the ordinances of God, he explicitly adds 'the oracles of God' rather than 'of the world' to clearly distinguish that this is his focus.

Thus, by inference, we can be more confident that his use of 'elemental spirits of the world' was NOT referring to Judaizers, as he reference was not to Moses but to basic pagan principles.

What about Gal 4:3 *'In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world' ?*

Paul includes himself here in those who are enslaved to these 'elemental spirits of the world' which I argue are humanistic or pagan principles. Paul was no pagan or Hellenistic Jew so how does this fit?

The fact that Paul admits to being enslaved by these 'elementary principles' seems discordant<sup>6</sup>.

However, note that Paul says 'when we were children', that is, he is referring to himself as a child (along with his listeners as children).

It is well understood in Judaism to this day that a child (even born into the Jewish race and circumcised on the eighth day) is not by default a child of Torah. He/she must be instructed in Torah and when he reaches 13 his understanding of Torah is tested (his Bar Mitzvah) and he becomes a 'son of Torah', a 'son of the Jewish people'. It is only through this initiation at 13 years of age that it officially puts off the pagan/Hellenistic or natural way of thinking and becomes a 'son of Torah'.

Thus Paul in Gal 4:3 is including himself, when he was a child, as a person enslaved to the 'world's ways', to paganism or human precepts. So I therefore believe this passage also fits with my general perspective on Col 2.

FF Bruce (and some other scholars) in 'Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free' refers to an Iranian Gnostic myth that was current in the Near East at the time. In the literature of this myth the term "the elementary principles" is used to refer to the stellar spirits which were identified with the heavenly bodies. Again this indicates that a Jewish heresy was not being referred to – specifically Paul was not addressing Judaizers with the use of this term.

The term 'human tradition' could of course be referring to the 'traditions of men' which are found in all cultures and which even Yeshua railed against. Thus, taken by itself, 'human tradition' could be referring to Jewish error such as the legalistic adherence to Oral Torah.

*9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,  
10 and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.  
11 In him also you were circumcised with a **circumcision made without hands**, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,*

Now some may argue that the secondary reference to circumcision here suggests an argument against Judaizers (as per Galatians), rather than against Hellenism.

The focus here though has temporarily changed to point at Christ. Paul is addressing how these Gentile believers have been grafted into the body of Christ, into the commonwealth of Israel. The proof of this change of emphasis follows in v14 which will be dealt with below.

Paul is simply stating that Gentiles have come into the body of Messiah without needing to be physically circumcised – this had already been established very explicitly by Paul.

Thus the contra/secondary reference here is simply to the difference between Jew and Gentile believers. Paul is not addressing the heresy or those preaching it in this phrase 'a circumcision made without hands'.

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<sup>6</sup> The solution to the problem of Paul's use of 'we' in verse 3 had escaped me for some time. Thanks to Frank Selch for this insight.

*12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

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

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

*15 He disarmed **the rulers and authorities** and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*

This section is clearly referring to the rules and authority of men. The 'handwriting in ordinances' (WEB/KJV) or 'record of debt' (ESV) is clearly a reference to laws of men not the Torah of Moses. The concept here of the triumph of the cross and the removal of a barrier, a record of debt is very similar to that recorded in Ephesians 2. I recommend my article 'Siblings of the King'<sup>7</sup> for an in-depth look at Eph 2 and specifically verse 15 for further background and support of my argument here.

Yeshua nails 'something' to the cross. Clearly this 'something' is ended or set-aside and no longer has any position of power and this action results in stripping (or overcoming) 'principalities and powers', the disarming of rulers and authorities.

As Yeshua specifically said he did not come to destroy the Torah, there is no logic or sense at all that the 'divine instructions' of God are the 'something' that is nailed to the cross.

Some versions have in v14 'contrary to us'. The Torah, specifically the Ten Commandments are not "contrary to us," rather they are a hedge of protection surrounding us (see Psalm 119:6), giving us freedom (see James 1:25 and 2:8-12), and bringing us to Messiah Yeshua (see Galatians 3:24), who supplies the grace and power that we need to keep them, for God's honour and glory.

*16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath.*

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

*18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting **on asceticism and worship of angels**, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,*

Leaving aside the focal verses 16 & 17, let us investigate the phrases used in V18.

The term 'worship of angels' was clearly Gnostic as it was condemned by the Rabbis in the Talmud (eg. Amora R Judan). If any Jewish sects did participate in such a practice they were certainly not mainstream proto-Rabbinic but rather, very liberal and Hellenistic. That is Judaizers would not have promoted the 'worship of angels'.

*"Still stronger opposition than that evoked **by prayer to, and worship of, the angels** was aroused by the views that made the angels partners in the creation of the world; and needless to say, the tradition that the whole world was created by angels, **inculcated by various Gnostic doctrines**, appeared even to apocalyptic circles (which assigned a considerable role to Princes, and angels, and even to angels of destruction, and angels of Satan, Belial and Mastema [hatred]) to be in conflict with Israel's Torah. **In condemnation of the worship of angels a Baraita teaches: 'If one slaughters. . . to Michael, the Prince of the Great Host. . . it is as flesh offered to idols.'**" The Sages – Their Concepts and Beliefs" by Ephraim Urbach.*

Plato introduced dualism which led to Gnosticism and this involved asceticism<sup>8</sup> – this is a mode of living that is a far cry from any typical Jewish lifestyle. Some argue of evidence at Qumran for the Jewish sect, the Essenes, embracing an asceticism, but there is evidence that this was partly due to Hellenistic influences. Certainly Yeshua did not himself embrace asceticism.

Asceticism is a mode of life that included dietary limitations, (but not the dietary laws of the Torah) and to which the phrase in verse 21 below is so clearly referring to, is Gnosticism (see Marvin Wilson, 'Our Father Abraham' p 169).

While it may be true that such a form of ascetic Judaism (or 'non-conformist' Judaism to use FF Bruce's term), was present in

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<sup>7</sup> Available from [www.restorationfellowship.info](http://www.restorationfellowship.info) or [www.charsiamcomputers.com.au](http://www.charsiamcomputers.com.au)

<sup>8</sup> Asceticism: Extreme self-denial, self-mortification and austerity. A doctrine that the ascetic life releases the soul from bondage to the body and permits union with the divine. As the TaNaK and 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism taught the unity of soul and body and rejected the immortality of the soul, asceticism then is a Platonic/Hellenistic not Hebraic or Judaic belief. FF Bruce rejects the argument that the Colossian heresy is some form of Gnostic Essenism based on what is missing from the text such as there being no mention of 'ceremonial washings'. Another scholar, Ephraim Urbach indicates that asceticism is not Judaic: *"The reasons for this opposition were many and varied; we shall mention only those that give expression to the **antithesis between the Halakha and asceticism.**"* (p447) 'The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs' (Halakha/Halacha means 'the way' or right living).

Colosse there appears little evidence for it. On the other hand there is good evidence for the existence of Egyptian cults that practiced 'absurd asceticism' (to use Schurer's term). *"And so we find that since the third century B.C. Egyptian cults had come to be very widely practised throughout Greece generally. Besides these, other Oriental worships, and that in strange admixture, are also to be met with particularly in the islands of Greece and in Asia Minor."* The History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ" Schurer p301.

Thus, there is plenty of evidence that asceticism has its foundations in Greek (Pythagorean) and Egyptian or Persian cults, not in Judaism.

To embrace the festivals and the sabbaths that are part of them (except Yom Kippur) meant to enjoy food (meat) and drink. Therefore, true ascetics would not do so. Thus there is clearly some confusion here where the language is not helpful. To live a life of simplicity, of avoiding any form of over-indulgence is not to be ascetic (see the definition of asceticism in the footnote below).

This is a vital and most significant point.

If in v16 Paul is speaking against believers being involved in the biblical feasts it certainly would make no sense to argue for this conclusion if those promoting the biblical feasts were ascetics. To repeat, by definition ascetics would not encourage or embrace biblical feasts, as they are not an act of self-denial but a joyous occasion when the ingestion of much food and wine was encouraged!

These Gnostics or Hellenists were clearly not happy to see their neighbours in Colosse partaking of food and drink; that is, enjoying the festivals.

Just try reading v 16 without the festivals section and you get ***'Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink ..'***

The question here would then be, what were they doing with respect to food and drink to be judged and for Paul to say to ignore this judgment?

Clearly, they can't have been fasting as this would be consistent with asceticism which Paul very clearly rejects in verse 18. The festivals and weekly Sabbaths on the other hand are times of good food and wine. So even in this simple exercise it should be abundantly clear that Paul was at the very least encouraging them that they should not let men or the traditions of men determine their behaviour where that behaviour was the result of the free choice to observe certain rules related to food and drink.

There are a couple of plausible ways to interpret this 'shadows' reference. It may be a Platonic one (see Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament By Stanley E. Porter p332 for a good reference) namely: *"The world of our experience, which we take to be real, is only a shadow world. The real world is the world of Ideas, which we reach, not by sense-knowledge, but by intuitive contemplation."* <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12159a.htm>

This Platonic concept is that the sun passes through the 'true' world of 'reality' or 'substance' into the world we inhabit where we only really see shadows of truth/reality. In this analogy or Platonic mindset, the Messiah is in the 'real world' (heaven – the spiritual world) and is thus the 'substance'.

If Paul is speaking out against a Hellenistic heresy, then we would expect him to refer to this Platonic mindset. In this understanding, everything we do here is a shadow. Thus the festivals etc., are not an endpoint in themselves, as Messiah is, but this does not devalue them anymore than it devalues ALL our actions in this age.

*19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.*

*20 If with Christ you died to **the elemental spirits of the world**, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—*

*21 **Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch***

*22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?*

The reference to the elemental spirits of the world takes us back to verse 8 and the Hellenistic mindset. The "Do not handle, do not touch ..." is then clearly seen as referring to ascetic practices (Wilson, p169 argues this as well and even that this ascetic

practice has continued to be deeply but falsely ingrained in Christendom).

Some may argue that the Essenes or a similar sect of Judaism was prominent in Colosse. A number of writers such as Philo state that the Essenes were not found outside of Israel.

More revealing is the statement by Emil Schurer, in "The Jewish People in the Times of Jesus" (1890 translated in 2005) states: *In all these points a surpassing of ordinary Judaism is apparent, and this is also the case in the strongly puritanical trait, by which the Essenian mode of life is characterized. They saw in many of the social customs and institutions, which the development of culture entailed, a perversion of the primitive and simple ways of life prescribed by nature. **They thought therefore that they manifested true morality by a return, to the simplicity of nature and of natural ordinances.** Hence their rejection of slavery, oaths, anointing oil, and of luxury in general; hence their **principle of living a simple life and allowing themselves only so much food and drink as nature required.** It cannot be shown that they practised actual asceticism by fastings and mortifications, by abstinence from flesh and wine. It was only the exceeding what nature required that they condemned."*

Also note that where this phrase in verse 21 is used it is referred to in verse 22 as a human precept and teaching. If it was indeed a doctrine of Judaizers, would Paul have called in a human precept rather than a mis-interpretation of scripture? As far as I can tell this phrase is neither biblical or even any part of Oral Torah.

*23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in **promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.***

Verse 23 reiterates the philosophical (self-made religion) and ascetic nature of the heresy that Paul was speaking against.

It is interesting to reflect on what was the typical behaviour of the Gentile converts in Colosse. Emil Schurer sheds some light on this:

*"The result of this was that to almost every one of the Jewish communities of the dispersion there was attached a following of "God-fearing" Gentiles who adopted the Jewish (i.e..... the monotheistic and imageless) mode of worship, attended the Jewish synagogues, but **who, in the observance of the ceremonial law, restricted themselves to certain leading points, and so were regarded as outside the fellowship of the Jewish communities.** ... Now if we ask ourselves what those points of the ceremonial law were which these Gentiles observed, we will find them plainly enough indicated in the passages already quoted from Josephus, Juvenal, and Tertullian. **All three agree in this, that it was the Jewish observance of the Sabbath and the prescriptions with regard to meats that were in most general favour within the circles in question.**" P314 Schurer "The Jewish People in the Times of Jesus"*

What does this tell us?

It tells us that Gentiles such as at Colosse were obeying the edict<sup>9</sup> of the Jerusalem Council (or were obeying the Noachide Laws) and were also observing the Sabbath. That is they were observing some restrictions regarding food; they were observing the weekly Sabbath and yet not observing all the ceremonial laws (the 613 mitzvot).

Thus when Paul writes to them and speaks into their lives he tells them to let no-one judge you regarding food and drink, etc. Surely, this was a word of encouragement not condemnation; a word to say 'enjoy being part of the commonwealth of Israel, enjoy the pleasures of the festivals and the worship, rest and fellowship of the sabbaths (or weekly Sabbath)<sup>10</sup>.

### The context of Colossians and the epistles of Paul:

To help with the context of Paul's epistle to Colosse, I think it helpful to reflect on the pagan view of the Jewish rituals that Paul refers to. In this respect, Juvenal<sup>11</sup> is a good example, for his words display some of the derision felt by most 'elite Roman' pagans with respect to Jewish rituals: *"There were three things in particular which the educated (?! my emphasis) **world of the time made the butt of its jeers, viz. the abstinence from the use of swine's flesh, the strict observance of the Sabbath, and the worship without images.** While in Plutarch it is seriously debated whether the abstinence from the use of swine's flesh may not be due to the fact of divine honours being paid to this animal, Juvenal again jokes about the land where "the clemency of the*

<sup>9</sup> The ruling of the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-28) made it clear that Gentile believers were excused from taking on the entire yoke of Torah (i.e. conversion) but instead were prohibited from four things: food offered to idols, fornication, meat strangled and blood.

<sup>10</sup> I will address the issue of whether or not the use of 'sabbath' in v16 refers to the weekly Sabbath or the sabbaths that are part of the festivals further on in this article. It is not a vital issue, at least from the perspective I believe Paul was promoting.

<sup>11</sup> Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis, known in English as Juvenal, was a Roman poet active in the late 1st and early 2nd century AD

*days of old has accorded to pigs the privilege of living to a good old age,” and where “swine’s flesh is as much valued as that of man.” Then as for the observance of the Sabbath, the satirist can see nothing in it but indolence and sloth, while he looks upon Jewish worship as being merely an adoring of the clouds and the skies. It would appear again that contemporaries with a philosophical training had, in like manner, no appreciation whatever of the worshipping of God in spirit”. Schurer p295*

In this quoting of Juvenal, we learn that the elite of Roman society around the time of Paul’s epistle thought very little of Jewish food laws, Jewish observance of the Sabbath and perhaps Jewish acknowledgement of new moons, etc (from the reference to adoring the clouds and skies). In other words, Roman society denigrated Jewish attitudes to *‘food ... festival(s) ... new moon or sabbaths’*.

So we could imagine some pagan Romans speaking, to their Greek or Roman friends or relatives who were ‘God-fearers’ and followers of Yeshua at Colosse, words like *“(Reject Jewish ways) in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,”*.

But wait a minute, this is what most mainstream Christian scholars argue that the Apostle Paul actually said and he was no pagan or pagan sympathizer.

So this statement could not have meant don’t get involved in these practices that pagans think are deserving to be the butt of jokes. Rather the Apostle Paul was surely saying, don’t fear the condemnation of the pagan society about you when you DO involve yourself in this observance of the Biblical Holy Days.

It is important to recognize that as the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul spoke out against all error that would lead Gentile believers away from the liberty found in Messiah Yeshua. This meant he spoke against Judaizers (as for example in Galatia) who argued for the necessity of physical circumcision, and he also spoke out against pagan heresies that had come into the community through the Hellenising of Judaism. I hope I have convinced you that in speaking to the Colossians he was concerned with the Hellenising influence that was trying to disrupt the path of the followers of Yeshua who had been taught to adopt the faith of Yeshua<sup>12</sup> and therefore embrace the Biblical Holy Days as part of their daily lives.

### **The term sabbath(s) in Col 2:16:**

Is this referring to the sabbaths that are part of the Festivals, the dates of which are based on the new moons, or was Paul referring to the weekly Sabbath, the 7<sup>th</sup> day of rest?

Again it appears most commentators, based on their prior commitment to this verse arguing against Jewish rituals, have contended that the sabbaths (most translations have the plural), refers to the weekly Sabbath, not to the sabbaths that were instituted as part of the biblical festivals.

There are a number of good reasons for questioning this consensus though.

Pastor Ron du Preez ThD, DMin has published a book ‘Putting the “Sabbath” to Rest: A Scriptural Study of the Sabbatōn in Colossians 2:16’, in which he argues that the structure that the apostle Paul employs in this passage is the chiasm, familiar in Hebrew writing and having an ABA (or ABCBA, etc.) structure.

The key to this understanding is Hosea 2:11, in which God states of Israel’s ceremonial observances, “I will also cause all her mirth to cease, her feast days, her new moons, and her sabbaths, and all her solemn feasts.” In Hosea 2:11, the sequence is chiasmic, which is typical of Hebrew thought.

To better appreciate this form of exposition, we first need to remember that Hebraic writing often used various forms of repetition or parallelism. A simple example of this is in the Shema (Deut 6:4-6) where we read *‘You shall love the LORD your God with **all your heart** and with **all your soul** and with **all your might**’*. This is really a repetition of the statement that you are to love God with all of you. The terms heart, soul and might really mean the same thing in this context.

So Du Preez’s argument is that the terms ‘feast days’, ‘new moons’, ‘sabbaths’ and ‘solemn feasts’ all refer to the Biblical feasts and so the phraseology in Hos 2:11 is in the form ABCA, where each letter represents a repetition of the same term or concept.

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<sup>12</sup> Rom 3:22 Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference, Rev 14:12 Here is the patience of the saints: here are those who keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.

This chiastic form<sup>13</sup> appears some 30 times in Hosea alone and in fact is prevalent throughout both the Old and New Testaments. The chiastic structure is very significant for proper biblical exegesis, but seems to have been largely forgotten. It was recognized many years ago when John A. Bengel in 'Gnomon of the New Testament' (5<sup>th</sup> Vol. 1742, p. 399), wrote: *"Often there is the greatest use in the employment of this figure, and it is never without some use, viz, in perceiving the ornament, in observing the force of the language; in understanding the true and full sense; in making clear the sound exegesis; and in demonstrating the true and neat analysis of the sacred text."*

Du Preez goes on to argue that this chiastic form is employed by Paul not only in Col 2:16 but just 5 verses later in verse 21 as well! - "*Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch*" (i.e. ABA). He argues that Paul is making reference to Hosea 2:11 by speaking of yearly feast days, such as Passover, the monthly new moon observances, and the yearly solemn feasts, e.g., the Day of Atonement (sabbaths).

To further strengthen his argument that the use of 'sabbaths' in Col 2:16 does not refer to the weekly Sabbath, Dr. du Preez points out that when the weekly seventh-day Sabbath is spoken of in the Bible, there are linguistic clues that help the reader distinguish between the ceremonial sabbaths and the weekly Sabbath. One of these linguistic clues is that God refers to the weekly Sabbaths as "My Sabbaths," whereas He refers to the ceremonial sabbaths as "her," "its," or "your" sabbaths.

Having been questioned in depth over this issue of whether the weekly Sabbath is included in this 'trio' in Col 2:16, I have come to believe, at this time that despite du Preez's alternative perspective, the weekly Sabbath is actually being referred to here. The issue that I find most convincing is the great parallel between Ex 45:17 and Col 2:16 in terms of this trio of observances. In researching Talmudic and other Judaic commentary on Ex 45:17, I could find no clear indication as to whether the weekly Sabbath or the sabbaths (specifically of Yom Teruah and Yom Kippur) were being described. I then found a calculation of the number of lambs needed for the burnt offerings being detailed in Ex 45:17 and noted that the weekly Sabbath was included in this calculation. Thus, at this point, I am swayed toward the position that the weekly Sabbath is indeed indicated, however, I remain open to further elucidation on this matter.

If we accept that the weekly Sabbath is indicated here, does this mean that Paul is arguing for some extremely momentous change here, a change of earth shattering proportions if he is arguing that the weekly Sabbath is to no longer have the central significance that it had in Biblical times and in the lives of Jesus and his disciples?

No, I do not believe so. Note first that if the perspective presented here is valid then Paul is arguing that the feasts and Sabbath be embraced not discarded. Thus, Gentiles are to embrace the weekly Sabbath also but clearly with a freedom from judgment.

The weekly Sabbath is forever and will even be honoured in the New Universe! See Ex 31:16-17 for example. To suggest some temporary suspension of its observance and the reduction of the Ten Commandments to nine for a period of time seems extremely unlikely, particularly given no explicit instructions for such a dramatic and life-changing event can be found anywhere in the Biblical canon.

The well known scholar Albert Barnes, referring to the phrase in Col 2:16, argues that:

*Or of the sabbath days. Gr, "of the sabbaths." The word Sabbath in the Old Testament is applied not only to the seventh day, but to all the days of holy rest that were observed by the Hebrews, and particularly to the beginning and close of their great festivals. There is, doubtless, reference to those days in this place, as the word is used in the plural number, and the apostle does not refer particularly to the Sabbath properly so called. ... No part of the moral law—no one of the ten commandments—could be spoken of as "a shadow of good things to come." These commandments are, from the nature of moral law, of perpetual and universal obligation.* —Barnes' Notes on the New Testament, Philadelphia, August 25th, 1832.

Another very interesting and plausible understanding is suggested by David J. Conklin<sup>14</sup>. He points out that the Greek word 'heorte' (Strong's #1859 - meaning 'feast' or 'festival') is translated as 'holy days' in the King James Bible and that this meaning of feast is never used of Yom Teruah (Day of Trumpets) or Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). Both these days are ceremonial sabbaths (see Lev 23: 23-32) and yet do not appear to be days for great feasting (Yom Kippur is a day of fasting) as with the other special days such as the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. Therefore if Paul had, in the original version of the verse,

<sup>13</sup> See [http://www.inthebeginning.org/chiasmus/introduction/chiasmus\\_intro.htm](http://www.inthebeginning.org/chiasmus/introduction/chiasmus_intro.htm) for a good explanation of chiasmus. Also see <http://www.hccentral.com/gkeys/chiasm.html> and <http://www.bsw.org/project/filologia/filo12/Art09.html>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.666man.net/Colossians\\_2\\_16-17\\_By\\_David\\_Conklin/colintro.html](http://www.666man.net/Colossians_2_16-17_By_David_Conklin/colintro.html)



used this word or some other word meaning 'feast' then it makes sense for him to include 'sabbaths' in the expression to clarify that he was including all the appointed feasts outlined in Leviticus 23.

An interesting alternative understanding which some scholars have argued for is that in verse 16 & 17 Paul is arguing that the holy days are a shadow of the age to come; that is, these are celebration days that help prepare us for life in the coming Kingdom of God.

According to 'A Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament' by Julius Fuerst (1871), Col 2:16-17 should read part: **In respect of a festival or new moon or Sabbaths-which are a shadow FROM things to come-FOR the Body of Messiah."**

Regardless of whether the weekly Sabbath is being referred to in Col 2:16 or not, I hope I have already shown that it's observance is not being questioned in any way, shape or form here. I will expand on this further on.

To conclude this section, here is a brief encyclopedia summary interpretation of the Colossians 2 is:

*Like some of his other epistles (e.g., those to Corinth), this seems to have been written in consequence of information which had been conveyed to him of the internal state of the church there by Epaphras(1:4-8). Its object was to counteract false teaching. A large part of it is directed against certain speculatists who attempted to combine the doctrines of Eastern mysticism and asceticism with Christianity, thereby promising believers enjoyment of a higher spiritual life and a deeper insight into the world of spirits. Paul argues against such teaching, showing that in Christ they had all things. He sets forth the majesty of his redemption. The mention of the "new moon" and "sabbath days" (2:16) shows that Gnostic ascetics were judging the body of Christ for "eating and drinking" and observing the "feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths." In response, Paul commands the saints to "let no one judge you...but the body of Christ," i.e. **the Church itself, which was observing these biblical holy days** (Matt. 5:17-19; Rom. 3:31). Paul focuses much of his epistle to the Colossians in combating the teachings of the early Gnostic sects, particularly ascetics (see Col. 2:4-23). From [http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Epistle-to-the-Colossians#Content\\_of\\_the\\_letter](http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Epistle-to-the-Colossians#Content_of_the_letter)*

### **The current situation:**

It is a fact of history the mainstream Christianity celebrates the 'Sabbath', the 7<sup>th</sup> day, on the Sunday. When and why did this change occur. Was it, at least in part, because of the Apostle Paul's epistle to the Colossians?

To repeat, Emil Schurer in referring to God-fearing gentiles states that Sabbath observance was still common even late in the 2nd century:

*Now if we ask ourselves what those points of the ceremonial law were which these Gentiles observed, we will find them plainly enough indicated in the passages already quoted from Josephus, Juvenal, and Tertullian (see notes 271 and 289). **All three agree in this, that it was the Jewish observance of the Sabbath and the prescriptions with regard to meats that were in most general favour within the circles in question.** Schurer in A HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN THE TIME OF JESUS CHRIST (1890).*

He also makes the point that the main reason for Sabbath (Saturday) attendance at the synagogue was for instructions:

*"Such an institution was created by post-exilic Judaism in the custom of the reading of Scripture on the Sabbath day in the synagogue. For it is necessary first of all to remark, that the main object of these Sabbath day assemblages in the synagogue was not public worship in its stricter sense, i.e. not devotion, **but religious instruction**, and this for an Israelite was above all instruction in the law.... Josephus rightly views the matter in this light: "Not once or twice or more frequently did our lawgiver command us to hear the law, but to come together weekly, with the cessation of other work, to hear the law and to learn it accurately." Nor was Philo in the wrong, when he called the synagogues "houses of instruction," in which "the native philosophy"<sup>15</sup> was studied and every kind of virtue taught."*

The Sabbath was obviously observed by Yeshua and Paul. There are many clear passages that testify to this. It is also true though the Paul speaks of meeting after the Sabbath was over, and therefore on the first day of the week (but actually on Saturday night) to commemorate the resurrection. For example, in Acts 20:7 we see that since Paul was an observant Pharisee, celebrating Shabbat, followed by Havdalah<sup>16</sup> would have been quite normal, and even fortuitous because it allowed him to

<sup>15</sup> You may have noted that Philo (and Josephus) refer to the practise of Judaism as 'native philosophy'. Note also though that these men were both Hellenists. See my earlier quote that no Talmudic literature uses this term.

<sup>16</sup> Havdalah is a Jewish religious ceremony that marks the symbolic end of Shabbat and holidays, and ushers in the new week. In Judaism, Shabbat ends—and the new week begins—at nightfall on Saturday.

incorporate the resurrection events. As each Havdalah points to a new beginning with reference to salvation (Isa.12:1-3) it would have been a wonderful opportunity to speak about the Risen One. Jesus was the reason for this gathering at the start of the first day, NOT the abolition of the Sabbath.

Rejection of Sabbath, and its replacement<sup>17</sup> by Sunday worship, was a rejection of Israel (which didn't occur until after 70 AD and more likely closer to 115 AD (according to Ignatius – see 'Our Father Abraham' by Marvin Wilson p115).

Paul's letter to the Colossians was written 10 to even 55 years earlier – thus it can not have been arguing for a chance to Sunday worship – if it had been, this change would surely have occurred much sooner.

Also the use of the term 'Lord's Day' for the Sunday (as used in The Didache (120 AD) is a mistaken understanding of what the 'Lord's Day' (in Revelation) actually means!

There is a Jewish saying "*More than Israel kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept Israel*". Thus, the Sabbath is much more than a Jewish marker. Marvin Wilson says "*Judaism treats the Sabbath as a queen or bride; its holiness is a reminder of the world to come. Judaism tries to foster the vision of life as a pilgrimage to the seventh day, the longing for the Sabbath all the days of the week*" (quoting Abraham Heschel).

In fact, there is some evidence that the Sabbath was observed before Israel. For example, even Prof Driver of Brown/Driver/Briggs fame, believes the Sabbath was of Babylonian origin (i.e. pre-Moses).

There is even some argument that the 10 Words were practiced by some prior to Moses:

*"This argument of the Cutheans could have been based on the view current among the Jews (The Book of Jubilees), that the Patriarchs already observed the Torah before ever it was given at Sinai. Their (the Cutheans') assertion concerning the temple that they had built at Gerizim purports to attest the antiquity of their worship, that it was pre-Mosaic.. This was a widespread belief among the Samaritans at this period, as we learn from Eupolemos, who tells us that Abraham was received by Melchizedek at the temple of Gerizim..... The fact that they call their god the anonymous deity is to be explained by the Jewish practice not to pronounce the Ineffable Name but only its substitute (cf. Κύριος in the Septuagint). This usage was also current among the Samaritans"* from "Jews, Judaism and the Classical World: Studies in Jewish History in the Times of the Second Temple and Talmud" by Gedalyahu Alon. Translated from the Hebrew by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem 1977).

So if none of the New Testament writers proposed the rejection of Sabbath observance, and if the change to Sunday did not occur until 70 CE at the earliest of more likely around 100 CE, what brought about this change.

The most obvious answer is the rise of anti-semitism and the Hellenistic influence on a community (the Church) that was increasingly Gentile in its makeup.

It would appear that a very similar influence that introduced the Trinity was at play here. In the same way that the New Testament is silent on the Trinity, it is even more silent of the abolition of the Sabbath and the inauguration of Sunday worship. I highly recommend a series of podcasts by Ron Dart on this issue (available from <http://www.borntowin.net/newsite/>).

What makes this even more definitive is that the weekly Sabbath had always been created for man's benefit; for man to have dominion over it, that is to gain life from it, not to be some form of bondage or legalism!

Flusser states interestingly, (Jesus, 2001) "*On that occasion, Jesus said, among other things, "The Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, man is lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). Literally, "the son of man." Here it means simply "man." This was already recognized in the seventeenth century by the famous Dutch scholar, Hugo Grotius in his commentary on Matt. 12:8."*

So Flusser is saying that all men, not just our Messiah have dominion over the Sabbath – why then would we remove or move it!!

Some scholars have argued that this change is recorded in the NT and have quoted Acts 10 and Gal 2, and possibly Romans

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17 Frank Selch's book 'Replacement Theology' gives great detail as to this anti-Semitic change in the church

14:5 as evidence.

Yet, there is absolutely no explicit mention of the weekly Sabbath in either Acts 10 or Gal 2.

Some also argue that for a Gentile convert to keep the Sabbath would be to become partake of something that was a national identity marker rather than being a 'new man in Christ'.

In the times that the Apostle Paul was writing though, the great majority of Gentile converts were already 'God-fearers' and so would have been observing the Sabbath (to the accepted degree at least of attending the synagogue, etc). Thus, this question or perspective would have been irrelevant to them.

The fact that this question is even asked today only proves how far we have moved from a Biblical standpoint, in the same way that a person coming to Messiah today is naturally expected to accept the Trinity, even though this is not an expression of the faith of Yeshua either.

In summary regarding Col 2:16 and the weekly Sabbath, there is therefore no real evidence for a rejection of the Sabbath. Even if it were being identified in Col 2:16, it is not being rejected, but Paul is encouraging his Colossians readers not to fear the judgment of the Hellenists and instead enjoy the participation in the Holy Days.

### **The Sabbath:**

The weekly Sabbath, as part of the Ten Commandments, the 10 Words, is a universal law that is immutable. How then might we best live so as not to fight the will of God?

Let us embrace it as a joy given for us to have dominion over; let us, with all the freedom we have from legalism, from the traditions of men; seek to honour this creation of God while as 'strong' (Rom 14:5) believers help others to embrace the Sabbath as best they can despite the challenge of our modern Western society.

Frank Selch in his booklet 'What about the Sabbath' (p 22) sums this up very well:

*The Apostle Paul makes it very clear throughout his writings that no amount of 'law keeping' can make anyone right before G-d. Included in this are of course observances of Holy Days and Sabbaths! At the same time, Paul makes it quite clear that we are not to judge one another by what one observes or not observes, eats or does not eat (Romans 14:1-10). Does that not tell us that if a brother feels that he wants to honour G-d by observing the Sabbath, others should not stand in judgment over him; in the same way he should not judge those who want to observe a different day, on which they want to worship G-d more intensely.*

*Bearing this in mind, I believe that I have a point in saying that if one were to choose a day, on which Christians should honour G-d corporately, why not select the day the Almighty had chosen for Himself in the first place? And could we not say the same for other traditional Christian non-biblical celebrations as well, or at least permit those who see (non-salvific) merit in commemorating Biblical events, to follow the guiding of their hearts?!*

*The Bible makes about 112 references to the Sabbath in the Tenakh, and 76 in the New Covenant writings. For instance, Paul did MOST of his teaching on the Sabbath, and not once is he recorded as saying that the Sabbath was superseded by worship on the First Day of the week. Throughout the history of the church there is ample global evidence that Christians felt that they should honour the biblical Sabbath.*

Also knowing that when we fail to fully appreciate how to act in harmony with God's moral code, we are not condemned because our salvation was and never will be dependant upon our obedience. Our obedience is the result of our salvation not the reason for it. The reason, the source, is always our Messiah and his and Paul's call to us to have his faith, to trust our God as he did.

Colossian 2 is the ONLY place in the whole NT where the phrase 'festivals, new moons and sabbaths' is used (Some would argue for Gal 4:10 as well but I believe this is incorrect<sup>18</sup>).

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18 Gerhard Kittel in his Theological Dictionary of the New Testament concludes that the middle voice of the Greek verb paratero ("observe") "seems to have the sense of 'anxious, scrupulous, well-informed observance in one's own interest, which does not fit the traditional celebration of the Sabbath or other Jewish Feasts but does fit regard for points or spans of time which are evaluated positively or negatively from the standpoint of the calendar or astrology (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, page 464). Kittel also concludes that this passage condemns either "apocryphal Jewish speculations about

Because it is the only place this phrase is used in the NT we need to be very careful about arriving at a 'new' (i.e. different from OT) revelation from it.

Instead take it at face value and leave it grouped and what we should see (based on the Jewish perspective of the writer) that it is a statement that there is nothing 'wrong' with observing (or not) these festivals.

With this approach, the more prominent status of the weekly Sabbath is really left untouched by this Col 2 commentary. In other words, we should NOT use Col 2 in an argument either for or against the weekly Sabbath at all!

What then are the clear facts regarding the Sabbath as a part of the Ten Commandments, the core of the Torah?

- 1) Jesus and Paul, and 'Jesus in Paul' kept the Torah. There is abundant evidence for this. In fact, the evidence is fairly conclusive that not only did they observe the 10 Words<sup>19</sup>, but that they also observed the ceremonial laws and much of the Oral Torah as well. Thus they both observed the Sabbath.
- 2) There is however also abundant evidence that Paul in reaching out to the Gentiles, told them that they did not need to get physically circumcised;
- 3) It is also a fact that 'Jesus in Paul' got Timothy circumcised, but it would appear this was because of his Jewish heritage (mother's side).<sup>20</sup>
- 4) It is a fact that the Levitical priesthood which was always a sacrificial system, ended with the ultimate sacrifice. Thus there was some change in the ordinances of God (Heb 7:12)
- 5) It is a fact that Jesus did not speak against the Sabbath at all, but he did speak out against the legalistic interpretation of the Biblical demands concerning the Sabbath. Jesus stated that the 'son of man' is Lord of the Sabbath. You can't be Lord or Master ('in charge of') something that doesn't exist or which has been made redundant. Why would a loving Father take away something which was 'made for man' i.e. given for our benefit.<sup>21</sup>
- 6) It is a fact that before the Messiah walked this earth a Gentile needed to become a proselytized Jew to become a son or daughter of God. The OT made provision for Gentiles to convert to Judaism such as Rahab, Ruth, and male foreigners who were circumcised as a prerequisite for celebrating the Passover (Exod. 12:48). In the NT though the Apostle Paul makes it very clear in a number of places that Gentile believers in Jesus do not need to be physically circumcised. In fact, we see in 1 Cor 7:18, that he said, not only should Gentiles refrain from circumcision but that Jews should not try to undo their circumcision (by epipasm).<sup>22</sup>
- 7) It is a fact that the Jerusalem Council made it very clear that Gentiles did not need to take on the entire yoke of all 613 Jewish rules and regulations. (At least not initially – some argue that this decision was temporary). It is also clear from the context that the reasons behind the list of four prohibitions were reasons of fellowship and outreach. It should also be clear that where ritual/ceremonial matters are discussed, Gentile believers are given the freedom of choice (I Cor. 10; 27-30; Rom. 14:1-6, 10-14; Col. 2:16).<sup>1</sup>
- 8) It is also instructive to study both why God included the weekly Sabbath in the 10 Words and what it means to obey this 'Word'. While, this is an issue worthy of considerable exposition, I think it helpful to mention a couple of points here. We

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lucky or unlucky days and seasons whose superstitious observance expresses inner bondage" or "Jewish feasts... regarded and celebrated superstitiously." Some other commentators find this calendrical series to be **purely pagan** in nature or suggest that it may be a blending of pagan nature worship with the Jewish cycle of holy days and feasts. See Troy Martin, "Pagan and Judeo-Christian Time-Keeping Schemes in Gal 4.10 and Col 2.16," *New Testament Studies*, 1996 page 112.

19 The core of the Torah (divine instructions) is the Ten Commandments, the 10 Words.

20 Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:13); took the nazirite vow (Acts 18:18; 21:1726); taught and observed the Jewish holy days such as: • Passover (Acts 20:6; 1Cor. 5:68; 11:1734) • Shavuot (Pentecost) (Acts 20:16; 1Cor. 16:8) • fasting on the Day of Atonement Yom Kippur (Acts 27:9) • and even performed animal sacrifices in the Temple (Acts 21:1726/Num. 6:1321; Acts 24:1718). Among his more notable statements on the subject are:

- "Neither against the Jewish Torah, nor against the Temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all." (Acts 25:8)
- "I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers." (Acts 28:17)
- "...the Torah is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good." (Rom. 7:12)
- "Do we then nullify the Torah through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we maintain the Torah." (Rom. 3:31).

21 Mark 2:27-28 And he said to them, The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath. See also the interpretation of this verse by the late Prof. Flusser.

22 1 Cor 7:18 Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision.

read in Gen 2:2-3 that God 'sanctified' the Sabbath. The Biblical Hebrew word used here though is l'kadesh and its true meaning is 'to be connected with God'.<sup>23</sup> The Sabbath gave the Jewish people a 'connection' with God. It does this for all who honour it. In Exodus we read the command to 'remember' the Sabbath and in Deut 5 the command to 'guard' (not keep –see 'Exodus' by Youlus 2006 p65) the Sabbath. The Jews were to remember the weekly Sabbath, not because of the creation event but now because they were saved out of slavery. The 6<sup>th</sup> day double portion of manna also helped them remember that they were to depend on God for their daily existence. To guard implies both a relationship with God and with each other. We see that even down to today, the Jewish people to a large measure have 'guarded' the Sabbath (it has kept them united as a people group, more than many other ethnic or cultural distinctive, The 'badge' of Judaism though is really circumcision not the Sabbath).

- 9) It is a fact that Jesus spoke very strongly on the issue of obedience in the Sermon on the Mount and that we therefore need to take the greatest care as teachers in how we present these issues:

Matt 5 18-20:

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*

*Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

The Sabbath then is not only part of the moral code, the moral DNA of the universe, it is also a great gift to mankind, something that the Hebrew's appreciated and valued very highly.

It would therefore seem totally foreign to the mindset of Yeshua or Paul to suggest this day be ignored or changed to another day. It seems extremely clear from all the historical evidence we have that the change by the church to Sunday worship was a deliberate change to reject Israel. It was not a change to enable Gentile believers to gain some form of freedom from Moses, it was not a change to place Yeshua's resurrection on the first day at the pinnacle of everything - neither Yeshua nor Paul called for this. Yeshua never tried to elevate the worship of him and his actions as the centre of our devotion - he always pointed to God. Joel Hemphill does a great job of explaining this in 'To God be the Glory'.

Thus to change the day of rest, the day of joy, the day of worshipping God to the Sunday makes no sense from a biblical and Hebraic perspective and further, there is NO clear, unequivocal explicit evidence anywhere in the NT for such a dramatic and discordant change.

It appears that Judaism understands so much better than Christianity the centrality of family, of community, of the group taking precedence over the individual - to institute a break in the Sabbath rest so that believing Jews worship on the Sabbath and believing Gentiles on the Sunday can only be seen as divisive not freeing; as anti-semitic not God-honouring.

To further then expect believing Jews to reject the Sabbath for Sunday was to ask them to surely reject far too much? It would seem almost as hard as asking them to accept the idolatrous practice of the Trinity.

To repeat, the simple, the straight forward reading of Col 2:16 statement that you 'let no-one judge you regarding the feasts and the sabbath' (regardless of which sabbath), has Paul saying to his readers, that they can enjoy and celebrate these days even though they are Gentiles.

If the culture surrounding these 'God-fearing gentiles' was as derisive to Jewish ways as the historical evidence indicates, then I do think Paul's call to 'let no-one judge you', is indeed an encouragement to maintain their practices of synagogue attendance etc.

### **Why the great differences of opinion of this verse:**

I find it interesting (and it may be the result of my less than exhaustive research), that it appears that almost all Jewish scholars

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<sup>23</sup> Exodus by Rabbi Yaakov Youlus 2006 (p 60)

and Hebraists see Col 2 as speaking against Hellenism or paganism whereas the mainstream Calvinistic and Higher Criticism type (i.e. Hellenistic in my opinion) scholars see it as speaking against Judaizers or a syncretic Hellenistic/Judaic view.

So what motives and misconceptions may be at work here?

Mainstream Christianity has an awful lot to lose if their interpretation of this chapter is wrong (in the same way that they have a lot to lose in considering the rejection of their Trinitarian doctrine).

Those who argue for the position I have been presenting here instead have a lot less at stake, because if this verse is removed from consideration, the biblical support for the removal of the Sabbath is virtually non-existent. Therefore, it should be abundantly clear that this verse has been given too much credence and this by mainstream, Hellenistic Christianity.

For a start, the Hebraic perspective on who is 'saved' is practical not creedal. That is, whether someone acknowledged a particular doctrine intellectually or not is not as important as how they lived. As Christians, as gentile believers, then, we know that our faith is secure through our acknowledgment of our Messiah and our obedience to him, etc.

Thus, the Sabbath issue, regardless of the 'correct' understanding is not going to condemn us. I believe each of us must work out our faith with fear and trembling and IF we do come to a point in our journey where we see the Sabbath as important then we need to take the appropriate steps in how we live.

I have come to this point.

Marvin Wilson in 'Our Father Abraham' is most emphatic and clear, with extensive support, that asceticism is not at the heart of Judaism or the Hebrew Bible; that is, it is not biblical. Also he argues that Col 2:21 ("Do not taste...") is ascetic and therefore not in anyway Judaic. In context then Col 2:16 is not a statement against Judaism and the feasts but an encouragement to enjoy them!

When a challenging issue is addressed with very clear pre-suppositions then there is a tendency to read the preconceived conclusion into the exegesis. That is to indulge in circular reasoning or 'affirming the consequent'. Thus, you can not use the fact that Col 2:16 (the conclusion – indicated by the word 'So' at the start of the phrase) is clearly referring to the Biblical Feasts to argue that therefore the heresy addressed throughout the chapter must be a Judaic one, and that those being challenged are Judaizers.

If Paul in Colossians 2 was addressing a heresy that involved Jews, then they were very much Hellenistic Jews and as such they would not have been pushing food laws, the festivals & sabbaths. The contrast Paul makes between these 'philosophies' and the Messiah is between he who is the pinnacle of Torah, the perfect expression of it, and the world's ways, the traditions of men wherever they originate from. Yeshua embodied and lived all that HaShem had declared in the TaNaK, and this included the festivals and the Sabbath, etc.

A quick look at the history of Christianity shows as that the Christian ascetics are also more Greek than Hebrew. Perhaps it needs to be re-stated but groups /sects which were Gnostic in much of their outlook can not have been Judaizers, that is, they would not have been arguing for circumcision, the food laws, for keeping the feasts and ceremonial law, etc.

As the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul's arguments were first and foremost to inform of the Messiah and the Kingdom against the paganism that surrounded him in the Gentile world. Certainly, he also spoke out against those who would force followers of Yeshua to become Jews by accepting all the Jewish markers such as circumcision, but the focus of his ministry was to the Greek world not to the Jewish world.

So the context of Colossians is very much consistent with Paul's ministry – he was extolling the virtues of Yeshua and Torah to a Greek community where the Hellenistic influences were trying to divert the God-fearers from embracing and enjoying biblical festivals, etc.

Given the incredible weight of evidence from the rest of the NT that the Sabbath and the festivals were still observed by Yeshua, by Paul<sup>24</sup>, by all the followers of Yeshua in all the lands, I think that Col 2:16 is clearly too equivocal to base such a

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<sup>24</sup> Some scriptures that highlight Paul's clear observance of the Biblical festivals:

Acts 20:5-6 *These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas, but we sailed away from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we*

Colossian 2:16; the Feasts of Israel and the Weekly Sabbath:

dramatic doctrinal change upon it, especially when v16 starts with "**Therefore let no-one pass judgment on you ...**".

That is, this issue is not 'life and death', it is not a salvation issue whichever perspective you come from. Therefore, to use it to remove the 4th commandment is, at the very least, most questionable.

Another popular argument is that the sabbath(s) being referred to in Col 2:16 is the weekly Sabbath, is based on OT precedent and the apparent 'trio' or 'triad'. That is, that is '*or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath*' the '*festival*' refers to yearly events; the '*new moon*' to monthly and therefore the '*sabbath(s)*' to weekly. If this pattern was intended then it would appear the term Sabbath(s) was referring to the weekly Sabbath.

While this seems plausible from our Greek mindset, consider these few scriptures:

*The contribution of the king from his own possessions was for the **burnt offerings**: the burnt offerings of morning and evening, and the burnt offerings for the **sabbaths, the new moons, and the appointed feasts**, as it is written in the Law of the Lord 2 Chron 31:3 (ESV)*

*We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular **burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts**, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God. Neh 10:32-33 (ESV)*

*And they were to stand every morning, thanking and praising the Lord, and likewise at evening, and whenever **burnt offerings** were offered to the Lord on **sabbaths, new moons and feast days**, according to the number required of them, regularly before the Lord 1 Chron 23:30-31 (ESV)*

Notice the association of the burnt offerings with the sabbaths, new moons and feasts. The burnt offerings were only performed at the Temple. Thus the sabbaths being referred to here are those that part of the feasts and not the weekly Sabbath. The triadic formula is just typical chiasmic parallelism.

Note also: "*Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates;*" Isaiah 1:13-14 (ESV)

And "*I will also cause all her mirth to cease, her feasts, her new moons, and her sabbaths, and all her solemn assemblies.*" Hosea 2:11 (ASV)

We see here in Isaiah 1 that God is clearly most displeased with the legalistic approach be taken to the Festivals. The Sabbath being referenced here is clearly those that are part of the feasts. As God's weekly Sabbath is eternal He can not possibly be calling for the weekly Sabbath to end. Similarly with Hosea, God clearly can't be referring to the weekly Sabbath as the seventh day remains.

Thus, the 'triadic formula' in Col 2:16 is clearly NOT referring to the weekly Sabbath at all.

The most important part of verse 16 though is the first few words that say '**let no-one pass judgment on you**' and therefore whether the weekly Sabbath is included here or not is not to my mind the most important aspect of this scripture.

Some also argue that the 4th Commandment was abolished based somehow on Gen 17 (Abraham being circumcised). The argument being that the weekly Sabbath, the food laws and holy days are all lumped together as practices that are no longer to be observed. Again this seems to be an example of the logic fallacy, 'affirming the consequent', where a false use of Col 2:16 is read back into Genesis 17.

Perhaps Genesis 17 could be used to argue that we must get circumcised if we were under the same covenant as Abraham. However, nowhere does scripture indicate that all 613 mitzvot or ordinances (or 618 for some sects of Judaism), must be

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*came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days.*

Acts 20:16: *For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.*

Acts 25:8 *While he answered for himself, Neither against the law of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Cæsar, have I committed any offence.*

Acts 28:17 (this was in Rome at the end of his ministry) *And it came to pass, that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together: and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people, or customs of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.*

Colossian 2:16; the Feasts of Israel and the Weekly Sabbath:

lumped together.

That is, when Paul and the writer of Hebrews clearly state that the ceremonial laws relating to sacrifice and circumcision (at least for Gentiles), are no longer valid, they are not by inference also removing the weekly Sabbath.

I think it also vital to appreciate that Abraham was 'saved' (made right with God), before he was circumcised. The circumcision was just an outward sign of an inward faithfulness.

We need to take care not to assume that the four prohibitions of the Jerusalem Council are ALL that Gentile followers of Jesus are to adhere to. If this were so then it places 'avoiding food offered to idols' as more importance than all the 10 Words; of more importance than the prohibition against murder for example.

Some also talk of the fear of going back under the 'shadow'. While it may be possible, it seems very clear that all who have the faith of Jesus, who demonstrate his faithfulness, can have nothing to fear from Jewish ordinances. Knowing that none of these regulations can bring salvation because we already have it; we can choose with the greatest freedom, to enjoy all the our Father has given us, from the weekly Sabbath to the joy of shouting praises to Yahweh on Yom Teruah (The Day of Shouting) and the joy of dancing around the Synagogue holding a Torah Scroll on SimChat Torah (the eighth and last day of the Feast of Tabernacles).

It may also help to reflect a little more on what the concept of 'shadow' may entail. For example, consider marriage as a shadow:

*For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as angels in heaven Matt 22:30 (ASV)*

*And Jesus said unto them, The sons of this world marry, and are given in marriage: but they that are accounted worthy to attain to that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: for neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. Luke 20:34-36 (ASV)*

*Let us rejoice and be exceeding glad, and let us give the glory unto him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready Rev 19:7 (ASV)*

*"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. Eph 5:31-32 (ESV)*

These texts show that the marriage of a man and women in this age is passing and is to be replaced or subsumed into the Marriage of the Lamb with his bride. Thus the substance again is Messiah and by inference the shadow is the current practice of marriage. May I suggest that part of the mystery referred to in Ephesians is how the 'shadow' points to the substance.

So marriage is a good analogy with respect to the 'shadows' of the Holy Days in Col 2:16. It is a shadow, something still real and relevant, but without the more physical reality of the thing it points to.

Incidentally 'shadow' can mean error but I would suggest the meaning in Col 2:17 could be as per Judges 9:15 where it means more 'protection' (as in the shade/shadow protects us from the sun).

How do we know this may be the correct meaning, rather than 'error'?

Because the phrase is a 'shadow of things to come'. Reading this as 'an error of things to come' suggests that there is in some way error in the Kingdom. Taking the context instead that the feasts, etc., help us to focus on our Messiah and on all the great things that God has revealed, we can see how the protection, the comfort of these festivals points to a greater celebration to come at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb and in the coming Kingdom of God.

These Holy Days are also a time of rest and rejoicing – how is this in any way binding when we use this time to focus on the return of our Messiah – for example many, both in Judaism and Christianity believe the Messiah will come/return at the Feast of Trumpets<sup>25</sup>.

Why do this if such days are not a blessing? God has given no clear reason why we should celebrate the first day of the seventh month. If the Messiah returns then, won't it become the greatest day of celebration? It may prove a bit hard to stomach for all

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<sup>25</sup> See my article on Yom Teruah available from [www.charismacomputers.com.au](http://www.charismacomputers.com.au)



those believers who rejected the Feasts, when in the Kingdom they will be called to celebrate this Feast (along with the clear instructions in Zechariah 14 to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, etc).

Some scholars also refer to 1 Cor 9 as supporting the argument that observing the Sabbath is in some way 'weak'. But the Sabbath is not mentioned here. There is no proof that the Sabbath is not part of the 'law of Christ' and it is certainly not 'outside the law of Moses'.<sup>26</sup>

Some also argue that "... asking someone to keep the weekly Sabbath means going back to the state of **immaturity under the law.**"

Why is enjoying a God given benefit, a day which even God Himself so ordained as to in some sense 'rest' (from creative work) on that day, a form of immaturity?

Is the church more mature today because it rejected the Sabbath and embraced Sunday instead? I see no evidence for this!

Maturity is a result of wisdom. Wisdom is a result of knowledge being gained and applied.

Yes, Jesus brought a great fulfillment of knowledge, The Old Testament was incomplete without him. So there may be a sense in which in applying that fuller knowledge we can be more mature than some. But there is no way, despite putting on the 'mind of Christ', that will I ever be more mature than Moses, the most mature and humble of men who saw and talked directly with God! Even in the resurrection when we sit down with Moses, Elijah, King David, etc. I am sure my maturity, my wisdom will not approach theirs.

An act of maturity would surely be that, where there is even the slightest doubt, we should observe Jesus and Paul and do what they said and did. After all, Yeshua said 'Those who do the will of my Father are my brothers and my sisters'. He even said 'do what the Pharisees say!'<sup>27</sup>

Jesus even looked upon the man who had observed most of the commandments and 'loved him' (Mark 10:21). This man, admittedly Jewish, would have observed the Sabbath.

When Gentile believers also remember and guard the Sabbath, we can also remember our exodus from slavery thanks to our Messiah's atoning sacrifice and we too can guard each other through the shared fellowship of this day.

The mainstream view on Colossian 2 appears to result from the following errors:

- 1) The misunderstanding that Col 2:16 is binding in some way, rather than an exhortation for a simple freedom of choice and freedom from judgment;
- 2) The mistake of seeing all the 613 ordinances and regulations as rising and falling together, That is, a failure to see the clear separation between the instructions given in God's own hand and those given to a specific people group, the Jews and even to specific peoples within that group such as the priests or woman<sup>28</sup>;
- 3) A failure to appreciate that Jewish and Gentiles (even in Messiah Jesus) have different expectations placed on them by God. While they are 'one in Messiah' it is a unity of purpose not sameness, in the same way that male and female believers remain distinctly different;
- 4) A mistaken understanding that in 'fulfilling' the Torah, Jesus 'abolished' it. This includes a mistaken concept of what it means to be 'obedient to Jesus' (Heb 5:9). For example some argue that "Yeshua is the fulfillment of all the Law".

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*26 1 Cor 9: 20- 22 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.*

*27 Matt 23:1-3: Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.*

<sup>28</sup> Many of the 613 mitzvot cannot be observed following the destruction of the [Second Temple](#), though they still retain religious significance. According to one standard reckoning, [\[3\]](#) there are 77 negative and 194 positive commandments that can be observed today. There are 26 [commands that apply only within the Land of Israel](#).[\[4\]](#) Furthermore, there are some time-based commandments from which women are exempt (examples include [shofar](#), [sukkah](#), [lulav](#), [tzitzit](#) and [tefillin](#)).[\[5\]](#) Some depend on the special status of a person in Judaism (such as [kohanim](#)), while others apply only to men and others only to women.

This is to misunderstand both the term 'fulfillment' and the 'Law'.

There is clear evidence as to what a Pharisee or a man with a Pharisaic mindset<sup>29</sup>, like Yeshua meant when he made this statement that he did not come to destroy 'Torah' but to fulfill it. Flusser explains in his seminal book 'Jesus' that to 'fulfill the Torah' was to correctly interpret and enact it and to 'destroy the Torah' was to interpret it incorrectly. Thus it was apparently quite common for Pharisees in arguments with each other to shout 'You are destroying the Torah!' or 'I am fulfilling Torah!'

Two examples that I think illustrate this well are Gal 6:2 and Romans 13:10. Try reading these passages and replacing 'fulfill' with 'correctly interpret and enact' and hopefully you will see what I mean:

Gal 6:2 *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

Romans 13:10 *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*

This context is of course perfectly in harmony with God's pronouncement to Moses that he would send a Prophet who would perfectly declare the Torah (that is, who would 'fulfill' it).

In conclusion then, what does Paul, the observant Jew say to Gentiles regarding the Holy Days (we cannot be sure if Paul was including the weekly Sabbath here):

*One man esteems one day as more important. Another esteems every day alike. Let each man be fully assured in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks. He who doesn't eat, to the Lord he doesn't eat, and gives God thanks. (Rom 14:5-6)*

To again reiterate, with respect to Col 2:16, the crucial phrase is surely 'let no-one judge you'.

It is well established that for the first 10-15 years after the ascension of Yeshua, his followers were all Jewish (this may have included some proselytes who were already part of the Jewish community at the time. Luke for example may fit this criteria).

Clearly though the receiving of the power of Holy Spirit by Gentiles (Cornelius in 50-55 CE) forced the disciples to re-assess the scope of the new move of God through Yeshua and to accept Gentiles into the fellowship.

This in turn led to the need to formulate some plan, as we see with the Jerusalem Council edicts (these were only minimal standards, according to Prof. Flusser in "Judaism and the Origins of Christianity"), so that these Gentiles could be included in the fellowship without needing to become Jewish proselytes.

It should also be obvious that the apostles needed to defend the new faith, the followers of Messiah Yeshua, against two opposing extremes (and nuances of these of course), the Judaizers and the Greek Pagans/Hellenists.

The Apostle Paul's dramatic change when he was shown that Yeshua was the Messiah, the Son of God, led him to be seen as an enemy by the Hellenistic Jews.

*Acts 9: 28-29 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.*

Yet at the end of his ministry in his last days in Rome, he stated most emphatically that he had not rejected the Written Torah or even the Oral Torah (the customs of the fathers).

*Acts 28:17 After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.*

*Acts 28:23 When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.*

So we see here that the Apostle Paul had not rejected his heritage, he had not abrogated the Law and yet he had clearly

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<sup>29</sup> Prof. David Flusser in "Jesus" (2001) p36 states: *"In the Pharisees, Jesus saw the contemporary heirs of Moses, and said that men should model their lives upon their teaching. This makes sense, for although Jesus was apparently indirectly influenced by Essenism, he was basically rooted in universal non-sectarian Judaism. The philosophy and practice of this Judaism was that of the Pharisees. It would not be wrong to describe Jesus as a Pharisee in the broad sense."*

spoken out against Judaizers. This should not seem in any way contradictory when we remember that the Judaizers were those who argued that the Gentile followers of Yeshua needed to be circumcised to be fully adopted into the commonwealth of Israel. While Paul rejected their legalistic argument, he did not reject the Torah, the Law of Moses, he did not reject the celebration of the Holy Days and the weekly Sabbath, he did not reject the Biblical expectations placed on his Jewish brothers.

With this clarity with respect to Paul's creedal practice and with the appreciation that it was no different to Yeshua's, we should be able to now see the freedom and grace displayed when Paul effectively said to the Colossians:

'My Gentile brothers and sisters in Yeshua the Messiah, do not succumb to the pressure of the pagan society you live in and reject the Biblical practices you have embraced on becoming both 'God-fearers' and disciples of Yeshua. The Biblical Holy Days, these great feasts that both point back to our freedom from slavery, but most importantly point forward to the Messiah's return and the coming Kingdom, are days that you can freely embrace if you desire. The feasts will give you a sense of the reality that will be yours with Messiah in the Kingdom. Avoid the false rules and regulations of the Hellenists that surround you but make the Messiah the Head of your life. He has raised you to life eternal. Hold fast as through Messiah Yeshua you grow in God.'

Paul Herring

January 2010

[www.charismacomputers.com.au](http://www.charismacomputers.com.au)

#### **Appendix:**

Highly recommended books:

'The Torah: Mosaic Law or Divine Instructions', 'Replacement Theology' & 'What about the Sabbath' all by Frank Selch

'Jesus' by David Flusser

'Our Father Abraham' by Marvin Wilson

Some other helpful websites: <http://www.colossians-2-16.com/index.html> <http://www.messiahnj.org/GenConvert-Ur.htm>

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