

**16–17 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.**

What does it mean here to “act as your judge” (κρινέτω, *krinetō*)?<sup>14</sup> We get help from the parallel term in v. 18, “let no one defraud you of your prize.” Here, the word καταβραβεύετω (*katabrabeuō*), which is used only here in the Apostolic Scriptures, means “to cheat someone of that which is rightfully theirs.” It envisions a judge or umpire at the games who robs the winner of his prize and gives the victory to his opponent.<sup>15</sup> The point is that the false teachers are judging the Colossian believers in regard to their *halachah* in observing the Torah commandments relating to food, drink, festivals, new moons and the Sabbath. The false teachers are telling the Colossians that unless they observe the commandments in strict adherence to their particular *halachah*, they are not actually keeping the commandments at all and will therefore fall under the judgment of God.

It is the common Christian interpretation of these verses that Paul had taught the Colossian believers to disregard the Torah regulations of kosher foods and appointed times, and that the false teachers were trying to persuade them that these were necessary. But that interpretation neither fits the wider teaching of Paul (as I have shown above) nor the immediate context. The false teachers are suggesting that the Colossians are failing to observe the commandments *as they had determined they should be observed*, not that the Colossians had entirely neglected the commandments.

This is reinforced by v. 17. The things under discussion, the laws of kosher, festivals, new moon and the Sabbath, are characterized by Paul as “a shadow of what is to come.” Note carefully that the word “mere” in the NASB is not actually in the Greek text. It has been added by the translators. Note further that the phrase is cast in what is yet to be: (literally) “a shadow of what is about to be.” The laws of food purities as well as the appointed times commanded by the Torah all have their ultimate purpose in revealing the full and completed work of Messiah, not only in His procuring salvation for the elect, but also and finally in bringing about the reconciliation of all things (cf. Col. 1:20). Thus, even following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Yeshua, the Torah commandments continue to function as a shadow pointing forward to the full consummation of God’s redemptive plan. Paul’s point is that these

14 This is a present active imperative, so more literally we might translate: “someone is not to judge you....”

15 See *BDAG*, “καταβραβεύω.”; C. E. B. Cranfield, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 103–04.

Torah commandments are not the end in themselves, but are signposts pointing forward to Yeshua's final reign and victory. They are therefore important but only as they point to Messiah. They cast a shadow, and "the substance (literally 'body') belongs to Messiah."

**18–19 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.**

The false teachers, while presenting their message as offering the Colossians a higher and more pious form of wisdom and knowledge, were actually seeking to defraud the Colossians of the very essence of their salvation in Yeshua. Here we find out more about the false teaching.

First, it was characterized by an extreme asceticism, the notion that one's own body was evil and that the only means of overcoming such evil was through self-abasement—the starvation of the body through extreme fasting or depriving the body of normal comforts and care. Taught as a means of overcoming hostile spirit-powers, such deprivation may have been used to induce a trance-like visionary experience, as the next phrase indicates. Once again, this perspective is far afield from what the Torah teaches, for the dualism of the later Greek philosophers finds no support in the Torah. From the perspective of Moses, the world God created, both in its physical and non-physical realms, is good and contains the very revelation of God Himself. Indeed, mankind was created in the very image of God, and it is this fact which renders the life of mankind sacred and elevates them above the animals. Asceticism found no place in Pharisaic Judaism or in the Apostolic Judaism portrayed in the writings of the Apostles. This highlights once again that the error Paul is combating here is that of a particular sect of Judaism, not what is taught in the Scriptures.

Second, the Colossian philosophy included the "worship of angels." Once again, such a thing finds no place in Pharisaic Judaism or in the Judaism of the Apostles. But first we must decide whether the genitive (of angels) should be understood objectively or subjectively. Is this phrase describing the activity of angels in the act of worship ("angels who are worshipping") or that the angels are the objects of mankind's worship ("people worshipping the angels")? Scholars are divided on this, but it seems to me that the subjective genitive has more supportive evidence than does the objective genitive. That is, while various strains of Judaism in the late 2nd Temple period gave more or

less emphasis upon the role of angels, the idea that they would have considered angels as objects of their worship seems far-fetched. In light of the strong significance in the late 2nd Temple period Judaism on monotheism, it is difficult to envision angels receiving worship which rightly was to be given only to God. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence in early Jewish literature that the worship of angels was forbidden, even as the Tanach itself prohibits the worship of the host of heaven (Deut 4:19; 17:3; Jer 8:2; 19:13; Zeph 1:5).<sup>16</sup> In *The Life of Adam and Eve* 13–15, angels are commanded by Michael to worship Adam as the image of God; in *pseudo-Philo* 34.2 sacrifice to angels is linked with magic and condemned.<sup>17</sup>

Because of this, some scholars have opted to interpret the phrase as a subjective genitive, that is, as referencing the manner in which the angelic hosts worship God. If this is Paul's meaning, then he is describing the Colossian philosophy as incorporating a mystical ascent to the angelic realms (much like the *Merkevah* literature) through vision or even bodily ascent. That late 2nd Temple Jewish literature was very interested in the activity of angels in the realm of heavenly worship is clear.<sup>18</sup> Equally significant is the evidence from Qumran:

Most interesting of all is the evidence that such worship was coveted at Qumran. According to IQSa 2:8–9 the rules for the congregation of the last days would have to be strict, “for the Angels of Holiness are [with] their [congregation].” But the implication of other references is that these rules were already in operation, indicating that the Qumran community saw itself as a priestly community whose holiness was defined by the presence of the angels (cf. particularly 4QCD and IQM 7:4–6 with Lev. 21:17–21). So explicitly in IQH 3:21–22: “Thou hast cleansed a perverse spirit of great sin ... that it may enter into community with the congregation of the Sons of Heaven” (similarly IQH 11:10–13). More to the immediate point, in IQSb 4:25–26 one of the blessings of the priest is: “May you be as an Angel of the Presence in the Abode of Holiness to the glory of the God of [hosts]. ... May you attend upon the service in the Temple of the Kingdom and decree destiny in company with the Angels of the Presence.” Most interesting of all are the recently published complete (but often fragmentary) texts of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (4Q400–405), which contain songs of praise to be offered

16 *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* 6.15; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 17.2; Philo, *De fuga et inventione* 212; *De somnis* 1.232, 238; *Ascension of Isaiah* 7.21.

17 As noted by Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, on Col 2:18.

18 Cf. 1 Enoch 14.18–23; 36.4, 39–40; 61.10–12; 2 Enoch 20–21; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 17–18; *Testament of Levi* 3.3–8.

to God by angels in the heavenly temple during the first thirteen sabbaths of the year and in which it is clear enough (since the Songs presumably belonged to the community's liturgy) that the community itself (or at least its priests) joined with the angels in reciting these songs of heavenly worship.<sup>19</sup>

However we are to understand the phrase "the worship of angels," it is clear that such was not normative in Pharisaic Judaism as we know it, which was by all accounts the Judaism practiced by the vast majority of the Jewish community in the time of Paul. Once again, this phrase makes it clear that the Colossian philosophy against which Paul was battling was a sectarian Judaism that had incorporated a great deal of mysticism (based upon visions), perhaps also borrowing aspects of the pagan mystery religions. Their teaching and worship was thus a far cry from the Scriptures (Tanach) that undergirded Paul's message.

And once again, Paul points out that such arrogant and false "humility," characterized by self-abasement, while having the appearance of lofty ideals, had failed to see that Yeshua is the all-important Messiah of God Who gives life and sustenance to congregations that belongs to Him.

**20–23 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.**

In the final paragraph, Paul returns to the fact that the Colossian philosophy has asceticism at its core, and that such deprecation of the body has not real value when it comes to true holiness. Now he describes this asceticism as the "severe treatment of the body," letting us know that it went far beyond fasting. He even incorporates what must have been the standard mantra of the sect: "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" To what does this refer? The first verb (*ἅπτω*, *haptō*), translated "handle" by the NASB, means more "to have close contact" or even "to have intimate contact" and could just as well be translated "touch." The same verb is used by Paul in 1Cor 7:1 to denote sexual relationship: "Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is

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19 Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, on Col 2:18.

good for a man not to touch a woman.” It is possible, then, that abstinence from sexual relations was characteristic of this sect on the premise that such relations lowered one’s purity.

“Do not taste” (γεύομαι, *geuomai*) could well refer to eating what would normally be allowed within the Torah regulations (i.e., clean foods) but which were prohibited by the additional rules of the sect. It is very possible that in their extreme asceticism, foods that were handled by Gentiles or even found in their presence may have been rendered unfit for consumption. Thus, “do not taste” more than likely carries with it extreme measures of food separation that were far in excess of what the Torah itself required.

“Do not touch” (θιγγάνω, *thinganō*) is a close synonym of the earlier *haptō* but may have the added sense of “grasp with the hand,” “to lay hold of something.”<sup>20</sup> This may relate specifically to the whole issue of purities and the attempt of those in the Colossian sect to remain separate from those outside of their group in order to attain a higher level of ritual purity. This was also a concern of the Qumran sect.

But whatever is precisely meant by these three negatives, Paul makes it clear that these prohibitions are not derived from the commandments of God, for he adds, “in accordance with the commandments and teaching of men.” Here is yet another clear indication that what Paul is combating is not the observance of Torah commandments as given by God through the hand of Moses but the ascetic teachings of a particular Jewish sect, teachings which were, after all, a “self-made religion.”

As such, this man-made religion, while it may have appeared as very esoteric and lofty, and perhaps as attaining to far greater holiness than most Jewish communities, actually was impotent to give its members any real strength against fleshly indulgence. It had the outward form or appearance of holiness but inwardly contained no real power against sin (cf. 2Tim 3:5).

### *Summary*

1. Paul had a positive, not a negative view of Torah (Acts 21:24; Rom 7:7, 14). For Paul, the Torah was good, not bad.
2. Paul considered the Torah to be the living, inspired word of God. According to 2Tim 3:16, the Torah is therefore profitable for righteous living.
3. With these facts in mind, if we interpret Colossians 2 in such a way as to have Paul instructing the Colossians to disregard the Torah, we have made Paul self-contradictory, and even worse, a false teacher.

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<sup>20</sup> *BDAG* notes that the verb can denote “hostility toward someone,” thus, “to grab.”

4. But when we study the Colossians 2 in its context, we discover that Paul is not combating the observance of Torah commandments but the infiltration of a “philosophy” based upon the teaching of men and not on the word of God.
5. This Colossian philosophy, which Paul calls “hollow and deceptive,” promised its members greater experiences of religious piety and worship.
6. While it is impossible to precisely define what this Colossian philosophy was, or the group or teacher that had formulated it, Paul does give us a number of things that characterized this errant teaching:
  - a) it offered a higher, more complete form of knowledge and wisdom
  - b) it required an ascetic life which involved severe self-abasement, adherence to many additional laws and restrictions, and mystical forms of worship.
  - c) those who taught the Colossian philosophy judged outsiders as having no real reconciliation to God.
  - d) entrance into the sect was through conversion for Gentiles (circumcision) and adherence to the strict rules pertaining to kosher laws, purity laws, observance of the appointed times, and perhaps abstinence from sexual relations at certain times.
  - e) these stringent measures were man-made, not anything found in the Torah itself, but were taught as the means by which a person could attain to the mysteries of God and thus to a heightened level of holiness.
  - f) the sect may have considered that through mystical experiences brought on by extreme self-abasement (fasting, deprivation of the body, etc), they were actually able to worship with the angels in the heavenly realm.
7. Paul clearly defines the Colossian philosophy as a deceptive argument, as the religion of men and not of God, and as offering no real value to the Colossian believers. In using these descriptors, he surely cannot be talking about the Torah given to Moses on Sinai.
8. When Paul tells the Colossians not to let anyone judge them in respect to food or drink, or a new moon, a festival, or a Sabbath day, he is instructing them not to be concerned that the false teachers judge them as estranged from God because they are not part of their particular sect. Rather, the Colossians should continue in the *halachah* they received from Paul, obeying the commandments of the Torah and remembering how the appointed times are a revelation of the good things that are coming, particularly, the return of Yeshua to reconcile all things.
10. Most egregious in the false teaching of the Colossian philosophy was

the lowering of Yeshua to a position of one among many equals in the heavenly entourage. Paul seeks to correct this errant teaching by emphasizing throughout the epistle that Yeshua has the unique and exalted position as the Son of God, for in Him the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form. Yeshua is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and He is the head of the *ekklesia* which derives its life from Him.

### *Conclusion*

Far from being a teaching of Paul that the Torah and its commandments have been set aside, the epistle of Colossians reinforces the need to walk in Yeshua by the same faith through which He is received (2:6–7), a faith characterized by obedience to God's commandments. What Paul was combating in the epistle is not teachers who were encouraging the Colossians to keep Torah, but false teachers who were trying to draw the Colossians into their own, man-made religion, a religion that diminished the unique person and work of Yeshua, and elevated an outward asceticism without having the power for true holiness.