



Holy Days and Sabbaths in Colossians and Galatians

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In his letters Paul warned Gentile believers against the observance of false sabbaths. To the Galatians he wrote, “You keep special days and months and seasons and years. You make me fear that all the pains I spent on you may prove to be labour lost.”¹ To the Colossians he declared, “allow no one therefore to take you to task about what you eat or drink, or over a festival, new moon or sabbath. These are no more than a shadow of what was to come; the solid reality is Christ's.”² (¹Galatians 4:10, ²Colossians 2:16)

In the bigger picture it is clear Paul opposed the Gentiles for keeping pagan festivals but not for observing the fourth commandment. Otherwise how could he have written; “I have done **nothing wrong** against the law of the Jews.”¹ Moreover, since Paul was **not** opposed to the “law of the Jews” this means his references to “special days” “new moons and sabbaths” the Gentile believers were observing were not any holy days prescribed in the Jewish torah. (¹Acts 25:8)

Paul's opposition to certain festivals is set against the backdrop that he himself observed “special days.” As a Messianic Jew he observed the “feast of Unleaven Bread” (Jewish Passover).¹ He also continued to observe “the Fast” (Jewish Day of Atonement).² He attended worship at the synagogue on the weekly Sabbath “every Sabbath day.”³ Which means Paul observed some “special days” and opposed other “special days.” This can only mean the “special days” Paul was observing cannot be the same “special days” he was opposing. (¹Acts 20:6, ²27:9, ³18:4)

Paul identified the “special days” the Gentile converts were observing as a carry-over from when they “did not acknowledge God.” In others words, they brought their pagan practices with them into Christianity.

“Formally, **when you did not acknowledge God**, you were the slaves of beings **which in their nature are no gods**. But now that you do acknowledge God ... **how can you turn back** to the mean and beggarly spirits of the elements? Why do you propose to enter their service all over again? **You keep special days and months and seasons and years.**”¹

“Be on your guard; do not let your minds be captured by **hollow and delusive speculations, based on the traditions of man-made teachings and centred on the elemental spirits of the universe and not on Christ.**” If we analyse the language of the text the evidence clearly shows that Paul concern was that his Gentile converts at Colosse and Galatia had chosen “to follow merely human injunctions and teachings”² (¹Galatians 4:8-10, ²Colossians 1:21, 22, 2:6-23)

According to Paul the Galatians and Colossians were “turning back” to their pagan roots. Paul identified their observance of “new moons and sabbaths” as something based on “hollow and delusive speculations.” He told them in plain language that their pagan “sabbaths” and “special days” were “based on man-made teachings centred on the elemental spirits of the universe and not on Christ.”

Gunther Bornkamm identifies the “holy days” Paul spoke against in Colossians and Galatians as pagan ritual.

“No doubt seems possible to me, however, on one point: The Colossian doctrine of the elements belongs to the ancient mythology and speculation of the Oriental Aeon -theology, which was widespread and active in Hellenistic syncretism.” (Gunther Bornkamm, The Heresy of the Colossians in Conflict at Colosse p.126)

The “special days” Paul spoke against were “man-made” holy days devoted to the worship of “the elemental spirits of the universe and not on Christ.” Meaning that the problem in Galatia and Colosse was not legalism; it was false worship.

Syncretism

What was occurring in Galatia and Colosse is known as syncretism, the merging of two or more religions into one. This was happening elsewhere. For example, Paul told the Corinthians that “you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.”¹ The reference to the “cup” and “table of demons” suggests the Lord's supper was being merged with pagan festivals. Paul's writings indicate syncretic worship was a common practice among Gentile converts to Christianity. (¹1Corinthians 10:21)

Paul saw evidence of the Christian religion being perverted everywhere by the adoption of pagan holy days. Oliver Buswell says; “pagan religion ... consisted largely of the observances of festivals and ceremonies”¹ and these pagan “festivals and ceremonies” were central to Gentile Christianity’s worship practices. (¹A Systematic Theology Vol.1 p.371)

A key text in evaluating Paul’s reference to “special days” is Colossians 2:20. “Did you not die with Christ and pass beyond reach of the elemental spirits? **Why then behave as though you were still living the life of the world?**”

In biblical times there were no atheists and the “life of the world” was filled with deep superstition and a lurking dread of the unknown. The “life of the world” was an intensely religious life frenetically devoted to placating invisible forces who controlled “Destiny” and “Fate.” “The innumerable deities and rites of polytheism were closely interwoven with every circumstance of business or pleasure, of public or of private life; and it seemed impossible to escape the observance of them.” (Cardinal James Gibbons, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire chap. XV, par. 15)

The religious syncretism in Colosse and Philippi was not merely a question of free choice but was a response to state interference in religion. Some form of religious compromise was necessary for maintaining normal existence.

“To profess the name of Christ, a person was compelled to renounce every other relationship in life. He could not attend a wedding or a funeral of his nearest relatives, because every ceremony was performed with reference to the gods. He could not attend a public funeral for the same reason. More than this, he could not escape by not attending the public festival; because on the days of public festivity, the doors of the houses and the lamps about them, and the heads of the dwellers therein, must all be adorned with laurel and garlands of flowers, in honour of the gods and goddesses of Rome. If a Christian took part in these services, he paid honour to the gods about him. If he refused to do so ... he made himself conspicuous before the eyes of the people ... he thus became subject to persecution.” (A T Jones, Christianity and the Roman Empire pp.76, 77)

Paul’s counsel regarding food offered to idols in 1Corinthians 8:1-13 was a moderate accommodation of the impossibility for Christians to escape contact with pagan rites. Besides social pressure there was the serious matter of Roman law. The Gentile Christians were under orders from Roman authorities to worship the national gods under the threat of death.

“Worship the gods in all respects according to the laws of your country, **and compel all others to do likewise.** But hate and punish those who would introduce anything whatever alien to our customs in this particular.” (Cited, Alexander Neander The History of the Church Vol.1, sec.1 part 1,div.3 par.2)

Whatever the personal beliefs the politics of the times demanded syncretism in worship. Under threats from the government the Gentile believers felt compelled to incorporate elements of pagan worship into their Christian practice. They did not give up Christianity they merely syncretized it with the religious practices of the times.

Paul believed by observing paganism’s “special days” the Gentiles were offering worship to pagan deities and he tried to lead them back to Christ. “For it is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied, and in Him you have been brought to completion.”¹ If divinity is “complete” in Christ, other deities are nothing. (¹Colossians 2:9)

Paul wrote to the Galatians; “formerly when you did not acknowledge God, **you were slaves of beings which in their nature are no gods. ... Why do you propose to enter their service all over again?**” In reference to the Gentiles “turning back” to their old ways Paul says, “**you keep special days and seasons and years.**”¹ So there we have it. The Gentile Christians were “turning back” to the keeping of the “special days” set aside for the worship of their pagan deities.

(¹Galatians 4:8-10)

Shadows of Things to Come

The theme of Colossian 2 is the dethronement of the cosmic powers. According to Paul Jesus “has cancelled the bond which pledged us to the law” because “**on the cross He discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment.**”¹ What was terminated at the cross was not the biblical Sabbath but the authority of the cosmic powers who were deprived of their power to enforce their “special days” centered on astrological calculations. (¹Colossians 2:14, 15)

In biblical times the term “shadow” (*skia*) was employed to describe ontological properties. In that sense it was employed “in Platonic philosophy (and) was a theme repeatedly considered and described in Hellenistic times.”¹ In his commentary

on Colossians and Philippians Ralph Martin says; “It is likely that Paul here is employing the ‘copy/original’ which derives from Plato and was used in the Colossian philosophy.” (¹Eduard Lohse, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians and the Ephesians p.116)

At one time Plato attended a play conducted in a cavern which was lit by flaming torches. As the actors danced on the stage their shadows reflected on the wall and mimicked their movements. The “shadow” (*skia*) of the actors perfectly mirrored their every move but the *skia* itself possessed no reality of its own. Paul is writing to Greek speakers who identified a *skia* as a void registering itself as a fleeting appearance.

Even in Hebrew thought a “shadow” denoted transitory existence; “Lord, what are human beings that you care for them, mere mortals that you think of them? ***They are like a breath; their days are like a fleeting shadow.***” (Ps. 144:3-4)

In Colossians 2:16 Paul is employing Platonic modelling contrasting “*skia*” and “*sōma*.¹” “These are no more than a **shadow** (*skia*) of what was to come; the **reality** (*sōma*) is Christ’s.”¹ In Greek thinking a “shadow” (*skia*) was considered to be “transient and imperfect.” Paul’s argument in Colossians is that the “holy days” set aside to worship the cosmic authorities represented a diminishing existence because the authorities themselves have been rendered impotent.

(¹Colossians 2:17)

Sabbaths of the Mystery Religions

The religion being introduced into the church at Galatia involved the worship of “beings which in their nature are no gods.”¹ The syncretism being adopted at Colosse was centered on the “cosmic powers”² who represented dark forces and involved “angel worship,” “visions,” “forced piety,” “self mortification” and “severity to the body.”³ It is in this context that the keeping of holy days and new moon festivals needs to be assessed. (¹Galatians 4:8, ²Colossians 2:15, ³2:18, 23)

Martin Dibelius identified the practices of the Colossians with the mystery religions, “especially the initiation of Isis.”¹

Petr Pokorny speaks of “the commonalities of the Colossian heresy with the conceptual world of the Hellenistic mysteries”.² F F Bruce says, “the form of teaching which was gaining ground at Colosse was something which belonged to a pre-Christian stage of experience.”³ (¹Cited Petr Pokorny, The Colossian Syncretism p.115, ²ibid p.116, ³F F Bruce, The New International Commentary of the N T. Colossians Philippians and Ephesians p.1000)

Eduard Lohse says, “In the context of Colossians, the command to keep festival, new moon, and Sabbath is not based on the Torah according to which Israel received the Sabbath as a sign of her election from among the nations. Rather the sacred days must be kept for the sake of ‘the elements of the universe’ who direct the course of the stars and also prescribe minutely the order of the calendar. ... ***The ‘philosophy’ made use of terms which stemmed from Jewish tradition, but which had been transformed in the crucible of syncretism to be subject to the service of ‘the elements of the universe.’***”

(Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon, p.155)

The “special days” mentioned in Galatians 4:10, and the festivals and “sabbaths” mentioned in Colossians 2:16 were sacred times “centred on the elementary spirits.”¹ While allowing for a possible Jewish input R A Cole says the special days and sabbaths, “could equally refer to the quasi-magical observances that we know to have been rife in Ephesus and, presumably, in other parts of Asia Minor. ... ***It is not necessary ... to see any Jewish influence in these Galatian customs.***”² (¹Colossians 2:8, ²R A Cole, The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians p.118, 119)

Whereas Colossians 2:16 makes an apparent use of Jewish terminology there is no Jewish content in such terminology in the context in which it occurs. The festivals, new moons and Sabbath days are declared to be “***based on traditions of man-made teachings***” so that rules out the Jewish Scriptures. We are also told the Colossian and Galatian holy days were “***centred on the elemental spirits of the world.***” If the “special days” the Colossians set aside for worship were based on the adoration of “the elemental spirits of the world” they were devoid of any connection to Jesus.

The claim that because the terminology in Colossians 2:16 sounds Jewish the sacred days must also be Jewish is open to challenge. The plain fact is in speaking to the prophet Hosea God Himself applied biblical terminology to pagan festivals in His denunciation of Israel's Baal worship.

"I will stop all her celebrations, ***her yearly festivals, her New Moons, her Sabbath days ... [and] I will punish her for the days she burnt incense to the Baals.*** ... They consulted a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood. ... They sacrifice on the mountaintops and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar and terebinth, where the shade is pleasant. ... ***Now their New Moon festivals will devour them and their fields.***" (Hosea 2:11, 13, 4:12,13, 5:7)

The sacred days of Baal followed astrological calculations and charted changes in the seasons whereas Israel's biblical festivals and sabbaths were linked to biblical directives. Which means apostate Israel drew on biblical and non-biblical sources for "all her appointed feasts" in its syncretic worship. Since Hosea 2:11 covers "all her appointed feasts" some of the feasts mentioned include "the days she (Israel) burnt incense to the Baals" (v.14.) This means Hosea provides an indisputable example of biblical terminology being applied to festivals that belonged to Baal.

According to Jubilees 6:32-37 some Jews were attempting to synchronize biblical feast days with the "feasts of the Gentiles" which meant biblical terminology was employed in a syncretic sense to cover both biblical and pagan festivals.

"And command thou the children of Israel that ... they will not leave out any day nor disturb any feasts ...
... ***[They] will forget the new moons, and seasons, and sabbaths and they will go wrong as to all the order of the years.*** For I know and from henceforth will I declare it unto thee, and it is not of my own devising; for the book written before me, and on the heavenly tablets the division of days is ordained, ***lest they forget the feasts of the covenant and walk according to the feasts of the Gentiles after their error and after their ignorance .***"

"For there will be those who will assuredly make observations of the moon - ***ten days too soon.*** ... and make an abominable (day) the day of testimony, ***and an unclean day a feast day,*** and they will confound all the days, ***the holy with the unclean, and the unclean day with the holy; for they will go wrong as to the months and sabbaths and feasts and jubilees.***"

It appears that certain "the new moons, and seasons, and sabbaths" Israel devoted to Baal had biblical titles but were pagan holy days. Some of the "sabbaths" mentioned in Hosea would have been pagan in their nature and timing. ***Hosea provides evidence of Jewish terminology being applied to pagan ritual.*** Moreover Jubilees 6:32-37 indicates biblical festival were reassigned to different calendar locations, some "ten days too soon." Since Jewish terminology has a dual role in Hosea Paul's use of Jewish terminology in Colossians 2:16 is no proof a reference to Jewish Sabbaths is intended.

Paul says he was opposing "***man-made" sabbaths "centred" on the worship of "cosmic powers.***" This identifies Colossians 2:16 as a reference to pagan holy days unrelated to Jewish ideas. Since Paul insisted in Acts 25:8 he did "nothing wrong against the law of the Jews" if the "special days and months and seasons and years" mentioned in Colossians 2:16 refer to Jewish sabbaths and festivals Paul's denial is indefensible.

According to Exodus 20:11 God's Sabbath is the seventh day of the week. "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, ***but He rested on the seventh day.*** Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." God identifies the seventh day Sabbath as "My" Sabbath. "You must observe My Sabbaths."¹ If the Sabbath is God's personal Sabbath it is both timeless and without any national identity. (¹Exodus 31:13)

There is nothing in Galatians or Colossians that calls the observance of seventh-day creation Sabbath into question. In Mark 2:27 Jesus said; "the Sabbath was made for man." Reference to "man" (*anthrōpos*) refers to all humanity as part of the created order. In the world to come all people will observe the seventh-day creation *shabbath*.

"[In] the new earth that I make ... ***from one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another,*** all mankind will come and bow down before Me,' says the Lord." (Isaiah 66:22-23)