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## A Few Remarks on Col. 2, 18. 19 a

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### A Few Remarks on Col. 2, 18. 19 a

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This verse has tried the patience of commentators, both ancient and modern, quite consistently. While many have been content to give what seemed to them the most plausible interpretation, a by no means negligible number of others have unwittingly admitted finding their "Waterloo" at this very verse by resorting to conjectures on account of a supposedly corrupt text, though there are, with only one unimportant exception, no variant readings. Like the suicide they consider conjecture the "man's way out," but seem to forget that tampering with the MS. record may lead to equally serious consequences. Superimposing their own speculations upon the sacred text, these people blue-pencil Scriptures according to their own whims and fancies and glibly tell the world what the original form of the text was. But these are not the dialogs of Plato or the dissertations of Aristotle — productions of the human mind; they are the inspired Word of the omniscient, infallible God even if some difficulties are met.

The difficulties presented by the words under discussion are closely bound up with the nature of the Colossian errorists. These are known to us only from the rather meager references to them in this epistle and, by contrast, from the points of Christian doctrine which the apostle stresses especially. While the references have been studied very thoroughly, though not always successfully, it seems that the latter source of information has often been either neglected or misunderstood.

It cannot be denied that the errorists were Jews who insisted upon the observance of the Ceremonial Law as still binding in New Testament times, and it seems as if they also demanded the observance by all men of the Nazarite vows concerning drink. Cp. Lev. 10, 8—11; 11; Num. 6, 1—4. To this must be added a speculative element, which may have been "a germ from which the later Gnosticism sprang," though it may be accounted for on other grounds as well.<sup>1)</sup> That is about all we can gather from the meager references in this epistle, and they are the only ones we have. That such a combination is entirely possible will be admitted when one remembers Philo's Platonizing.

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1) Speaking of the dualism of the Gnostics, Dr. E. G. Sihler says: "And there is little doubt but that they got their clue from certain tenets of Plato. Whenever we pass from the *Republic* of Plato (where the felicity and the perfection of the non-material and eternal world of forms or ideas are set forth) — whenever, I say, we pass on to Plato's effort to explain creation and the material world, an effort made in his *Timaeus*, then indeed we are brought face to face with that body of speculation out of which the Gnostics spun their dualism of the good

Moreover, a study of the epistle will reveal that it abounds in contrasts, which further help to characterize the errorists at Colossae. Briefly stated, we meet the contrast of visible and invisible, of sight and faith, of creature and Creator, of human wisdom and divine wisdom, of human tradition and divine revelation, of elementary knowledge of the world and the treasures of knowledge in Christ, of implied incompleteness of Christian knowledge and completeness in Christ, of shadow and body, of humility and being puffed up, of self-called teachers and called teachers, of man-made laws and Christian liberty. The mere recitation of these contrasts makes it evident that the errorists must have been also rationalists. This combination is not unusual. For what was it that made the Jews reject Christ? Was it not their own puny human reason, which told them that the Messiah must be a mighty temporal ruler and that the lowly Nazarene could not help them? That was their own speculation, while at the same time they were meticulous about observing the Ceremonial Law, including the traditions of the elders. And we cannot get away from the fact that there are in reality only two religions. It is either grace or works, and human reason always chooses the way of works. Besides, all false religions agree in this, that the object of their worship is not the true God revealed in Christ. The object is either a combination of objects with a supposed God included or angels or saints or man's own virtue, and so on down to objects of coarse wood and stone. Even the worship of the different types of false religion differs only in degree of intensity and extension. Since the depravity of man is the same the world over, the natural, unconverted mind of man runs in the same channels regardless of time or clime. It is invariably a movement away from God, which, if it remains unchecked, degenerates more and more and seeks ever lower objects and ever more hideous forms of worship, just as the reprobate and criminal will stoop to ever more disgusting and revolting vices and crimes. The Colossian errorists were no exception.

In view of these facts it will not do to dismiss offhand the possibility of angel-worship on the part of the Colossian errorists at such an early date for no better reason than that we have

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and perfect God and of the imperfect and inferior power, the Creator, the former being the Platonic ideal deity and the latter the *demiurge* of the *Timaeus* and of the Old Testament." (*From Augustus to Augustine.*) If the Gnostics "got their clue from certain tenets of Plato," as seems to be the case, they did not spring from the germ at Colossae. Since, however, the error at Colossae was at least similar to Gnosticism in tendency, it may have been introduced there by way of Alexandria, Philonism having trickled through in some manner.

no secular source of corroboration, though we know that angel-worship was practised in postapostolic and later times, also at Colossae. Does not this very epistle condemn such a use of the traditions of men? As to Zahn's objections (repeated by Ewald), based on the monotheism of the Jews, the idolatry practised by the Israelites and Jews upon occasion is sufficient refutation. Since there are no valid reasons to the contrary, it is simplest and most natural to understand *θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων* of angel-worship, the genitive being a genitive of the object. It should also be noted that even some Roman Catholic exegetes adopt this view in spite of the fact that Lutheran theologians consistently use this verse to refute and condemn the invocation of saints. Hence let us grant with many great theologians of our Church, including Chemnitz, that the false teachers at Colossae worshiped angels in some manner and reject this view only when further, better reasons are adduced against it.

The mere enumeration of a few doctrines especially emphasized by St. Paul, together with a few additional statements, will serve to further characterize the Colossian errorists. St. Paul finds it necessary to dwell especially on the doctrine of the person and work of Christ, of whom he says that He is "the Image of the invisible God," 1, 15. He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible, even of all angels, 1, 16. The errorists seem to have argued that they could not worship the unseen God, forgetful, besides other things, of the fact that He is revealed in Christ, who is His exact Image. Though nothing constrains us to assume that they openly denied Christ, their conduct and worship of angels certainly implied His insufficiency as sole Mediator between God and man. Just as erroneous views may have been held by them regarding Creation. If they had any affinity with the speculations of the later Gnostics, though only in tendency, it must be sought here. Again, Col. 1, 20 may have been directed against their false notion that the angels had to be placated in some manner by man, who had lost their good will by the fall into sin. The admonition to remain in faith (1, 23) no doubt refers to the efforts of the false teachers to beguile the faithful. "And this I say lest any man beguile you with enticing words" (2, 4), following immediately after the statement that all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hid in Christ (2, 3), goes to show that the errorists supposed the knowledge of the Colossian Christians to be incomplete and considered themselves capable of supplying the deficiency. Thus v. 8 charges them with human speculation, which they considered necessary to complete their Christian knowledge. Cp. 2, 10. Finally the apostle emphasizes the priority and superiority of Christ over all hostile principalities and powers, culminating in the

declaration: "Having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it," 2, 15. It would seem that they also feared evil spirits. All this is very "reasonable." Witness Maryolatry and saint-worship as the modern analogy. Human reason says that Mary is closer to humanity, or as Chemnitz states the reasons of those who invoke the saints: *Quia scilicet Christus durior, rigidior et asperior sit, sancti vero magis propitii, clementes et misericordes, immo ad exaudiendum et iuvandum promptiores, utqui easdem calamitates in carne ipsi etiam experti sint.* (Examen, De Invocatione Sanctorum.) Even so it was human reason that led these errorists to worship angels in order to placate them and to make them subservient as partial mediators. Angels, they would reason, are creatures like as we are and have been seen by many in the Old Testament, and their appearance in the New Testament, though not as frequent, still is a reality. But they are holy and thus able to approach God, whom they serve, thus opening the way for us.

The objection that the apostle would have condemned such worship in stronger terms loses its force if we remember that the apostle commends the Colossians for the steadfastness of their faith in Christ (2, 5); that the false teachers evidently urged their false views not so much by aggressive propaganda as by "enticing words" and their conduct; and that they were still members of the congregation (2, 19). The references in the epistle indicate that they were not the bold and boisterous type, but rather of the sinister, insinuating kind and as such would endeavor to spread their views by means of calculated and oily words. They were smooth talkers, clothed in extreme humility, assumed a sanctimonious attitude, and were innocent of great clarity in setting forth their views in the absence of a comprehensive and well-developed system of doctrine. Cf. also the following remarks on the participle *θέλων*. The error at Colossae evidently was in an incipient stage at the time of this writing. What is more, the same objection might be urged with as much force against any other view.

Having thus briefly sketched the nature of the Colossian errorists, let us proceed to discuss a few details. V. 18 is to a certain extent parallel in structure to vv. 16 and 17 and represents a progression. Where v. 16 has *Μη οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω* (Let not any one judge you), v. 18 has *Μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς καταβαθευέτω* (Let no one condemn you), the latter being a stronger term. *Οὖν* refers back to v. 10-15. Because of what Christ is to them and has done for them, especially because Christ has canceled the bond against them and triumphed over all hostile powers, the Colossians should not let any one judge them in eating and drinking, etc., and should

let no one condemn them by humility and angel-worship. Through His cross Christ has freed them from the curse of the Law and completely abolished the Ceremonial Law; through His cross He has spoiled all evil spirits and divested them of their power and dominion. It is a tragedy to pass under the yoke of the Law again after having been liberated, and it is foolish and unnecessary to worship angels. It has been shown, especially by Abbott, that the simplex βραβεύειν seems to have dropped all reference to a prize and only means "to decide." Καταβραβεύειν would then mean "to decide, or to give judgment, against." "It is adopted instead of κατακρίνειν probably in order to suggest the idea of assumption of authority." (Abbott.) "Perhaps here in Colossae there was a flavor of assumption and officialism in their conduct." (A. T. Robertson.) Many other exegetes agree.

So far no great difficulty is encountered. But the next word, the participle θέλων, has caused much perplexity. Some have assumed a Hebraism and translated "taking pleasure in," but they arrive at this Hebraism on the basis of a few Septuagint translations of a word which does not mean θέλων. A view with such slight support had better run for cover before Paul's rich vocabulary demolish it. Just imagine Paul, well versed in Greek as he was, the greatest intellect of our era, resorting to a "kind of Hebraism" to make himself understood by those who spoke Greek fluently! Others have resorted to conjecture. We maintain, with Robertson and others, that the participle has been correctly and purposely used by the inspired writer in its primary sense of resolving, purposing, determining. Accordingly we translate: Let no one condemn you, purposing to condemn you by humility and angel-worship.

However, let us revert to καταβραβευέτω for a moment. We have seen that this verb is synonymous with κατακρινέτω, the difference in shade of meaning very likely being that of the idea of assumption of authority. In Luke 11, 31 we read: "The queen of the South shall rise up in the Judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them" (κατακρίνει αὐτούς). Her good example will condemn them. Heb. 11, 7 we are told that Noah condemned the world by his faith evidenced in the building of the ark (πίστει . . . δι' ἧς κατέκρινεν τὸν κόσμον). These passages throw light upon the manner in which the errorists would condemn the Colossians. They would condemn them by their conduct and behavior, namely, by means of their humility and angel-worship, in other words, by their example. And because that is said of them *in malam partem* and in order to prepare the readers for the following participle, καταβραβευέτω is used instead of κατακρινέτω, which we should expect after the simplex in the preceding verse. Thus the preposition ἐν is taken instrumentally,

which is a common phenomenon in the New Testament and in the Koine generally. Hence the resultant idea is not essentially different from that expressed by *διὰ* in Heb. 11, 7. That takes us back to the participle once more.

True humility is a commendable Christian virtue, whose very nature is devoid of all ostentatiousness, but because the errorists were guilty of parading their counterfeit humility in order to condemn the faithful Christians,—a conduct against which the apostle's whole nature revolted,—he found it necessary to indicate his sentiments and feelings in some manner and at the same time to strike a telling blow, which he does, in keeping with the marvelous brevity and compactness of the whole epistle, by very neatly using a single word, the present participle *θέλων*, where secular writers or some of his commentators would perhaps have used a whole sentence. This was made possible by the choice of *καταβραβεύετω*, which warned the readers with its suggestion of the assumption of authority, which suggestion is repeated and further stressed by the participle. Thus the participle, used absolutely, serves the apostle's purpose admirably well. It was self-evident to his readers that *καταβραβεύειν* was to be understood. Let us not be dogmatic in our application of either the Attic or the Hellenistic yardstick to Paul's Greek. So long as he uses words not found elsewhere in the whole range of Greek literature and even coins some new ones, we have no right to be surprised at occasional peculiarities in construction. Why vitiate the simplicity with a Hebraism (rather Septuagintism) or a conjecture just because this construction balks at the efforts of the translator? St. Paul simply says: Let no one condemn you if he purposes to do so (think of it) by his humility and angel-worship. This is a fine bit of irony, so deftly introduced that a translation cannot do justice to it. This is also a further answer to the question, Why does the apostle not use stronger language to condemn the errorists as severely as he did those in Galatia? *θέλων* indicates that the Colossians were not fully aware of the intentions of the errorists because the errorists had merely begun to conduct themselves in such manner. On any other supposition the mildness of the apostle's rebuke is inexplicable. He is warning against dangerous tendencies rather than against any well-developed heresy. To argue back from the second and third centuries and postulate an incipient Gnosticism is unscientific.<sup>2)</sup> Whatever goes beyond

2) One could, of course, with as much plausibility start with the anti-Jewish systems and, arguing back to the first century, come to the conclusion that, since they depreciated and even rejected the Old Testament "and, with it, the Law as a system of divine injunction or moral obligation" (E. G. Sihler, *loc. cit.*), the Colossian errorists could not possibly have had any affinity with them even in tendency.

the direct references and the characterization gained from the contrasts in this epistle is of evil.<sup>3)</sup> Moreover, the term Gnosticism has been overworked as a convenient head under which to classify, for want of a specific term, heresies only remotely related, like the folder labeled "adiaphora" in many vertical files.

In the following relative clause critical evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of omission of the negative, and the very fact that several conjectures have been suggested goes to show that only subjective considerations have made them necessary. The clause *ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων* has its parallel in *ἃ ἐστὶν σκιὰ τῶν μελλόντων* of the preceding verse. As the precepts of the Ceremonial Law are a shadow of future things, so the nebulous humility and angel-worship of the errorists are the fruit of their own perceptions, on which they base them. Their own speculations, even if based upon what they have perceived, are just as unimportant in comparison with the true revealed knowledge as is the mere shadow of the things which have now appeared. Even the most logical deductions of the human mind in the sphere of religion are as inferior to revealed truth as the shadow is inferior to the body casting it. The Colossians should absolutely refuse to be influenced in the least by such as still cling to shadows long after they have served their purpose, should refuse to be influenced by such as rely upon their own perceptions for supposedly necessary supplementary knowledge. The perfect *ἑώρακεν* makes no sense in its primary meaning of seeing with the physical eye. It may also signify a mental seeing, a perceiving, knowing. What the errorists have perceived with their own mind is meant. That they consider reliable knowledge. They follow their own reason, adopting what seems reasonable to them and rejecting what does not. On account of their inborn *opinio legis* they went in for

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3) It is true that Cerinth demanded observance of the Mosaic Law, but even his system cannot be considered a full-blown system of Gnosticism; it is merely Gnostic in tendency as compared with the later systems. Yet the Colossian error cannot be definitely linked even with Cerinthianism. Peake denies Gnosticism even in a rudimentary form (*Expos. Gr. Test., in loc.*), but misrepresents the angelology of Scripture. In the absence of any definite information it is best not to be too dogmatic. It must be admitted that the errorists could have been former Pharisees "gone to seed" by reason of their residing in the diaspora. It must be further admitted that the later Jewish angelology could have influenced them to the extent of causing them to worship angels. It must finally be admitted that error in its very nature is a "leaven which leaveneth the whole lump," slowly, but surely corrupting all truth. If Robertson is right when he says that "Essenism is Pharisaism gone to seed," that tendency must have been inherent in all Pharisaism, and then we can speak of Pharisaism as having been arrested in its tendency towards Essenism. If that be true, we should place the Colossian errorists half-way between.



work-righteousness in real Jewish fashion. As the Pharisees prayed on street intersections to be seen of men, so these legalists paraded their counterfeit humility to be seen of men. That and the worship of angels seemed reasonable to them. Upon their own perceptions, their own knowledge, they took their stand (*ἔμβατεύων*);<sup>4</sup> upon that they based their speculations. Their humility and angel-worship was the result of speculations based upon what they had perceived, in other words, of their human reason. And that and the strict observance of the Ceremonial Law, with some additional precepts, constituted their boasted superior knowledge. Robertson says: "This clause has long been an exegetical enigma, but it seems to be now cleared up by an inscription in the sanctuary of Apollon at Claros, where the verb [namely, *ἔμβατεύω*] is used of an initiate entering in for initiation into the mysteries of the god, discovered by Sir W. M. Ramsay. So Paul uses it of one of these Gnostic devotees who has been initiated and who dwells on the secret visions which he has imagined or seen." And then he quotes M. Jones with approval as follows: "Taking his stand on what he has seen (in the mysteries), vainly puffed up by his unspiritual mind." Yet the perfect "has seen" and the following present participle will not suffer such an interpretation. The inscription uses the verb *ἔμβατεύω* to describe the entering of an initiate for the purpose of first being initiated into the mysteries of the god, whereas Paul is speaking of such as already have seen or perceived (note the perfect tense) and are now taking their stand upon the already perceived (note the present tense of the participle). And Robertson actually admits this by quoting M. Jones with approval as follows: "Taking his stand on what he has seen." The "exegetical enigma" vanishes if we stick to the simple text and do not *a priori* take Gnosticism for granted and then imagine seeing the heresy lurking behind every innocent word.

While priding themselves upon their superior knowledge, they were yet subject to superstitions (fear of evil spirits). Is such a combination possible? Cf. Acts 17, 22 for an answer. Even if Paul did not use the word *malo sensu*, their religiousness was in the last analysis superstition, *Aberglaube*, since the fear of incurring the anger of a possible unknown god caused the erection of an altar to him in order to placate him. That in the very seat of learning, in "a sort of Oxford"! Witness also the systems of theology of Thomas Aquinas and other Roman dialecticians and

4) Thus the Revised Version, margin. This translation is listed and conceded as possible by Thayer, Abbott, and others. Ebeling, *Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, sub voce: "*Darauf fussend*," though he understands it of visions.

the consumption of them by the hierarchy even of enlightened America, although they are a conglomeration of knowledge, dialectic, and superstition. Dr. Pieper put it straight and to the point when he said in an address: "Glauben ist ein relativer Begriff. Er hat zu seinem Korrelat Gottes Wort. Glaube, christlicher Glaube, hat stets nur *vis-à-vis* des Wortes Gottes statt. Ohne Gottes Wort ist der Glaube Aberglaube. Oder wie Luther es oft ausdrueckt: Ohne Gottes Wort wird in die Luft geglaubt. . . . Die Roemischen glauben stark an den Papst. Sie glauben, dass jeder Mensch, der selig werden wolle, unter dem Papst sein muesse. Das ist starker Aberglaube. Dem Glauben fehlt Gottes Wort. Gottes Wort lehrt das Gegenteil. Zum Seligwerden gehoert nur, dass ein Mensch unter Christo sei." (Read the entire remarkable address in *Lehre und Wehre* 62, 385 ff.)

The errorists are further described by the words εἰκῆ φυσούμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν (without reason puffed up by the mind of their flesh and not holding the Head). "Noûs, a natural faculty, indifferent in itself, may be either under the influence of the spirit or the flesh." Their νοῦς is entirely under the influence of their sinful flesh. Their boasted intelligence is not spiritual at all; it is carnal, and the carnal mind is enmity against God. Without reason they are puffed up by their supposed superior knowledge. That marks their humility as spurious. The irony becomes sharp in the contrast between "humility" and "being puffed up." A. Maclaren has these lucid remarks: "The self-conscious humility was only skin-deep and covered the utmost intellectual arrogance. The heretic teacher, like a blown bladder, was swollen with what, after all, was only wind; he was dropsical from conceit of 'mind,' or, as we should say 'intellectual ability,' which after all was only the instrument and organ of the 'flesh,' the sinful self."

And the consequences are of a very serious nature indeed: they are not holding the Head, namely, Christ. They are "severing the limbs from the mainspring of all energy and life." All error is movement away from Christ, and persistence in error will inevitably sever one's connection with the life-giving and sustaining Head. These errorists were themselves not holding the Head and by their enticing words and a display of humility and angel-worship were about to lead others away from Christ, their only Mediator. Thus speculative reason depreciates and finally rejects the very source of life. *Qui non unice Christum tenet, plane non tenet.* (Bengel.)

In the sphere of religion human reason, human philosophy, only leads away from God. Cf. Rom. 1, 19—25. Only by means of the Gospel, which is universally powerful, effective, and com-

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plete, is the proper relation established with the unseen God through His Son, Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and man, and by the reconciliation made by Him *between God and man*, also the angels have been made our friends and protectors, but they are only creatures, whom we should not worship. And by the same work of redemption by which peace has been restored in the "family of God," the evil spirits, who also are only creatures, but fallen and rejected, our enemies to be sure, have been vanquished and therefore need not be feared any longer if we but remain steadfast in faith in the great Conqueror. Finally, there is only one avenue to complete Christian knowledge and true freedom, namely: "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," John 8, 31. 32. That spells complete knowledge and complete freedom. Just as surely there is only one way to the Father, namely, His Son, who tells us: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father but by Me," John 14, 6. In the final analysis all error is directed against Him, the Mediator of reconciliation and creation. Men will depreciate and reject Him, the "sign spoken against," while the world stands, but let us cling to Him and reject all error and nip it in the bud, as St. Paul does in this epistle.

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## What the Liberal Theologian Thinks of Verbal Inspiration

(Conclusion)

This is what J. S. Whale thinks: "The modern man is not impressed by the mere citation of texts; he rightly wants to understand them, in their context. His very certainty that the Scriptures are the fount of divine wisdom — that it is indeed the Word of God which is spoken to him in the words of the Bible — has set him free from the bondage of the letter, the prison-house of verbal infallibility. It is no use shilly-shallying here; loyalty to truth in the shape of literary and historical criticism forbids it. A Christian knows that he has to serve God with the mind as well as with heart and will and that the obligation to be intelligent is itself a moral obligation. The Bible is abused when it is used merely as an armory of proof-texts for defending some theological scheme (a game at which more than one can play, notoriously enough). We use the Bible rightly only when, to quote Luther, we see that it is the cradle wherein Christ is laid; that is, when we worship the holy Child and not His crib. These letters" [written to the