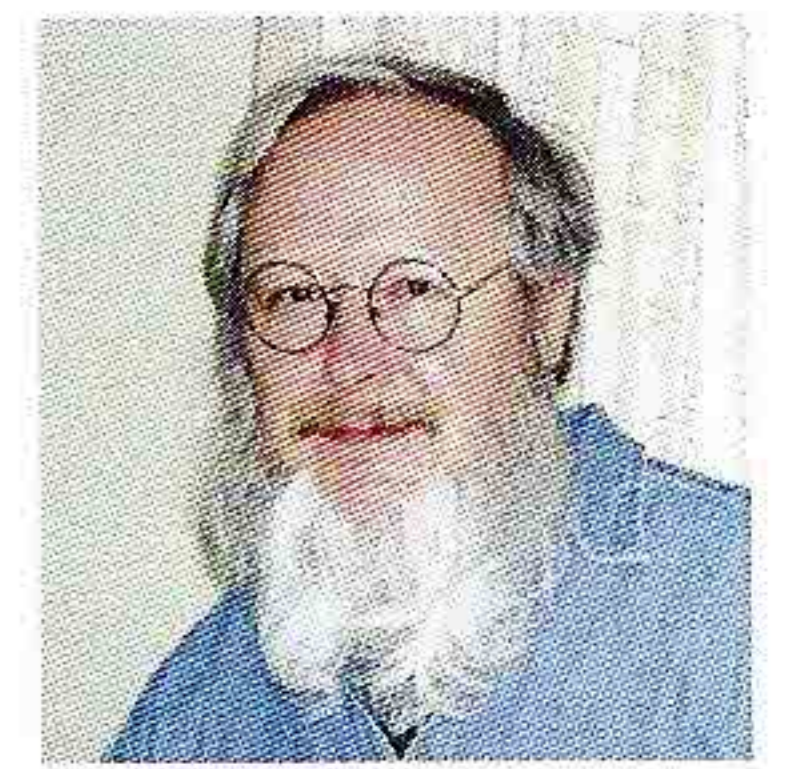


What Was Nailed to the Cross in Colossians 2:14?

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"Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross" (Colossians 2:14 KJV).

What was nailed to the Cross? *Cheirographon*, that's what. It might be Greek to you, but it's a Greek word you should know if you want to understand what was nailed to the Cross in Colossians 2:14.

Many Christians erroneously believe that "the handwriting of ordinances" (*cheirographon tois dogmasin*) in Colossians 2:14 refers to the Old Testament Law of Moses. According to this misinterpretation, God's Law was "against us" and "contrary to us" because it was a heavy yoke of bondage. It was an impediment, a hindrance to man's attempt to be reconciled to God. Therefore, God had to "take it out of the way" and get rid of it. He did this by nailing it to the Cross.

In other words, we are reconciled to God by Christ's abolition of His Father's Law. So says this popular misinterpretation of Colossians 2:14.

This view is flawed for a few different reasons. First, it contradicts the biblical truth that God's Law, properly understood, is neither "against us" nor "contrary to us." According to the Bible, God's unadulterated Law is a blessing, not a burden. (See, e.g., Deut. 4:5-9, Ps. 19, Ps. 119, Rom. 7:22, 1 Tim. 1:8, and many other passages.)

A second reason this view is flawed is because it portrays Jesus as a slick lawyer who finds a legal loophole to thwart God's justice. Jesus gets us off the hook by simply abolishing the commandments that we broke. "You've been accused of breaking the Sabbath? No problem. I'll just abolish that commandment." But Jesus said we are to not even think that He came to abolish the Law. (See Matt. 5:17-19.)

A third reason this view is flawed is because of the meaning of that long word *cheirographon*. A study of this word will reveal exactly what it was that got nailed to the Cross in Colossians 2:14. When you see what really got nailed to the Cross, you will find it far more liberating than believing that Jesus blotted out His Father's commandments.

The Greek word *cheirographon* is a compound word that is formed by combining the two words *cheir* (Χειρ, "hand") and *grapho* (γράφω, "to write or engrave"). In its simplest sense, the word means a handwritten document.

Other than in Colossians 2:14, the word *cheirographon* appears nowhere else in the Greek New Testament, nor does it appear anywhere in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. However, the word does appear in extra-biblical Greek documents. It is in these documents that we learn that *cheirographon* is a legal term. It is a word that was used to refer to the written evidence of a person's guilt in a courtroom. It is the written record of a person's crimes — the laws he has broken and the penalty he owes for his law-breaking. In ancient times the accuser would present the *cheirographon* from the middle of the courtroom, called *tou mesou*, "the middle" — the exact same term Paul uses when he says the *cheirographon* is taken "out of the way [*tou mesou*]."

Because *cheirographon* and *tou mesou* are legal terms, you must think of *cheirographon* in a legal context to understand its meaning and to appreciate the significance of Paul's statement in Colossians 2:14. You must picture yourself in the context of the Heavenly Courtroom. God is the presiding Judge. You have been arrested and brought into the Courtroom of God. You stand accused of breaking God's laws.

In God's Courtroom, there is a prosecuting attorney: Satan, the Adversary, the Accuser of the brethren. In his hands the Adversary holds a *cheirographon*, a legal written document. It is a written record of every sin you have ever committed. It is a detailed account of every time you broke God's law. The *cheirographon* lists the dates, the times, the locations, the testimony of witnesses, and all the other details of your law-breaking. The information on this written document is not based on hearsay or unfounded suspicions. It is recognized by the Court as a legal and legitimate document. The Adversary holds in his hands the indisputable proof of your guilt, along with the penalties that the Court prescribes for such crimes, and he presents the *cheirographon* to the Judge.

Fortunately, you have an Advocate with you in the Courtroom of God. "And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). Your Advocate does not deny the truth of the charges brought against you. Your Advocate admits that the information on the *cheirographon* is true. You have indeed committed all these crimes, and you do

indeed deserve the penalty which is prescribed on the *cheirographon*. However, your Advocate says, the penalty for all your crimes has already been fully paid. Your Advocate paid the penalty Himself when He went to the Cross and took upon Himself the sins of the world and bore the punishment for your sins.

Because the penalty has already been fully paid, the Judge tells Satan that his *cheirographon* is inadmissible evidence in the Heavenly Courtroom. Therefore the *cheirographon* that was against us, which was contrary to us, is taken out of the way. It is removed from *tou mesou*, the middle of the Courtroom occupied by the Accuser. Then it is nailed to the Cross like a banner, proclaiming Messiah's triumph over sin on our behalf. By paying the penalty for our sins, Yeshua spoiled the Adversary's plans to condemn us with the *cheirographon*. That is why the very next verse says, "And having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Col. 2:15).

This removal of the *cheirographon* is something entirely different from the erroneous assumption that God's Law got nailed to the Cross. The word "law" (Greek, *nomos*) does not even appear anywhere in the entire Book of Colossians, neither in the Greek text nor in the KJV translation. Of course God's commandments are alluded to in conjunction with the *cheirographon* (*tois dogmasin*, "of ordinances"), because in order to accuse us, the Adversary obviously has to list which commandments ("ordinances") we broke. But it is not the commandments of the Law which are removed. Rather, it is the written record of our law-breaking that is removed from the Courtroom.

This understanding of the *cheirographon* as the legal record of a person's sins can be seen not only in Gentile Greek literature, but in Jewish Greek literature as well. The Greek text of the apocryphal book *The Apocalypse of Elijah* describes an angel holding a book. The book is called a *cheirographon*, and it contains the record of sins. The traditional Jewish *Avinu Malkenu* prayer likewise paints a similar picture. This prayer is in Hebrew, so it obviously cannot use the Greek word *cheirographon*. However, it describes a scenario similar to Colossians 2:14 when it asks God to "erase all the documents that accuse us."

God does more than erase all the documents that accuse us. If God merely erased the record of our sins, the Adversary could point to the smudged *cheirographon* and say that someone tampered with the evidence. So God does something even better than just erasing the record of our sins. God takes the *cheirographon* and removes it from the Courtroom, leaving the Accuser empty-handed, with absolutely no evidence to condemn us, and with no power to punish us. The *cheirographon* is nailed to the Cross like a banner to declare our victory. Thus the instrument that Satan intended for evil God uses for good.

God nailed the *cheirographon* to the Cross (verse 14) and thereby spoiled principalities and powers, making a show of them openly and triumphing over them (verse 15). But what about verse 16, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days"? Does the removal of the *cheirographon* mean that we can now be gluttons and drunkards and Sabbath-breakers? Does the fact that Jesus paid the penalty for our law-breaking mean that it is okay for us to return to a life of law-breaking?

The Apostle Paul is not saying that God's dietary laws and holy days are unimportant. The context of these verses is in regards to the imposing of man-made rules and regulations. Six times the words man or men appear in Colossians chapter 2: "And this I say, lest any man should beguile you" (vs. 4); "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men" (vs. 8); "Let no man therefore judge you" (vs. 16); "Let no man beguile you" (vs. 18); "why ... are ye subject to ordinances (Touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using) after the commandments and doctrines of men?" (vv. 20-22).

The Sabbath and dietary laws of the Bible are not commandments of men; they are commandments of God. Paul is not telling us we can disregard the commandments of God; he is telling us we can disregard the commandments of men — men who would impose heavy burdens upon God's people, burdens that God did not command, burdens that turn Sabbath-keeping into a burden instead of a blessing. Some teachers in Colossae were doing this, just like some Pharisees did. "For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders" (Matt. 23:4).

The Orthodox Judaism of today evolved from the Judaism of the Pharisees, and it still retains some of the leaven of the Pharisees. Like the Pharisees of old, modern-day rabbis expect Jews to abide by hundreds of rabbinical rulings that prescribe exactly how to keep the Sabbath and all the rest of the Torah. The rabbis prescribe how to keep the Sabbath in such great detail that a person never has to be led by the Spirit; theoretically he will never find himself in a situation where he has to hear from God and make his own decision about how to obey the Torah. The rabbis have already prescribed every detail. They even have man-made laws that govern bug-killing on the Sabbath. They tell Jews which kinds of bugs can be killed and under which circumstances these bugs can be killed. If you happen to kill the wrong kind of bug, or you kill the right kind of bug under circumstances that the rabbis have not authorized, then you have violated the Sabbath according to their view. This is just one of many examples of doctrines and commandments of men that put God's people in bondage.

