

## Intro

Colossians 2:16–17 is a pretty powerful passage when it comes to defeating the false theology of Torahism. This is what's taught by groups like the Hebrew Roots Movement and Hebrew Israelites. They say that new covenant Christians are required to keep all of the old covenant rituals, and that not doing so is sinful and disobedient. Maybe you have some friends or family members who are getting into this. And because this passage in Colossians 2 so clearly teaches that Christians are not required to keep those things, a lot of "Torah-keeping" Christians have developed some very creative objections and reinterpretations of this passage in an attempt to make it fit their theology.

Today we're going to test three of their biggest claims about this passage - and one little bonus claim, too. But we're not going to test them against what I say, but against what Scripture says. And I'm going to show you why, and how, those claims just don't hold up. And let me remind you that our ministry isn't here to attack people, but ideas are fair game. The Bible says Christians ought to test teachings to make sure they're biblical, and that's exactly what we're going to do.

And I'll say this: many "Torah-keepers" who are deeply committed to that belief system are very resourceful when it comes to trying to avoid passages like this that so clearly undermine their theology. But the simple fact is that the Bible, in multiple ways and multiple passages, is clear on this issue: Christians are not required to keep the old covenant rituals. Every branch of mainstream Christianity, in every culture and every era over the last 2,000 years, has recognized this. And one last thing before we jump in— here's something really important to keep in mind: Because anytime you discuss issues like this with a "Torah keeper," they're likely to miss it, and you'll probably need to remind them of this more than once: The reason Christians aren't required to keep these things is not because they were abolished, its because they were fulfilled in Christ.

Jesus came not to abolish, but to fulfil. And it's not because they weren't commandments given by God Himself - they most certainly were commands of God - its because He gave those commandments to Israel in the context of the Sinai Covenant, and followers of Jesus, by contrast, are under the New Covenant. Same God, different covenant. Okay, with that, let's first take a look at the passage in question and then we'll set our sights on those Torah-keeping claims.

### **Colossians 2:16-17**

Colossians 2:16-17 isn't really a mysterious or difficult passage to understand. Paul makes a pretty clear statement here. He writes this: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

So a plain reading of this passage at face value says that we Christians shouldn't let anyone pressure us when it comes to issues of what we eat or what days we celebrate because those things were shadows but the reality is Christ.

And notice the text doesn't say we "must" keep those things, and it also doesn't say "we can no longer" keep those things. It simply says "don't let anyone judge you." Now, because of the wider context of Colossians, I read this passage as the Gentile believers being pressured to keep those rituals and Paul saying "No, don't keep them. They aren't required of you." But even if we take a more charitable view, the best we could conclude is that Paul is placing those rituals within the sphere of Christian liberty. He's saying we're free in Christ to keep or not keep those things as our conscience

directs us. At least that seems to be the plain reading of this passage. But context is king, so let's widen our scope a bit and see if that's what Paul really is saying here. Now, I'm going to give us a contextual overview here, but if you're not familiar with the book of Colossians, I would urge you to pause this video and go read the whole thing. It's only 4 chapters. It'll take you about 10 minutes to read, and then you'll get a good sense of the tone and topics that Paul's talking about. Colossians is a letter written by Paul to the church in Colossae, which was a Roman province located in what would be modern-day southwestern Turkey.

And although Paul had never personally visited the church there, he wrote this letter to address false teachings that were troubling the primarily Gentile believers. We don't know the exact nature of those teachings, scholars call it the Colossian Heresy, but from this letter we can tell that it was a mixture of Jewish legalism, mystical asceticism, and pagan philosophy. So Paul is primarily addressing former pagans who were being pressured by Jewish-influenced teachings.

So that's the setting for this letter. And Paul begins in chapter 1 with thanksgiving and prayer for the church, and he begins to talk about the supremacy of the son of God. This is where we find that beautiful passage where he writes: "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

So Paul spends some time here really expressing a high Christology, teaching his readers about the overwhelming supremacy of Christ. Which is what Paul always does, he points us to Jesus. And here he's doing it for a very specific reason: he's going to contrast the sufficiency of Jesus with the things the false teachers have been saying. And then in chapter 2 he begins talking about our spiritual fullness in Christ. He says, in verse 9: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority."

He's again highlighting the supreme authority of Jesus over all things, including the things the false teachers are saying. And then he reminds his readers about their own journey, and what Jesus did for them. This is the passage just before the one we're going to dive into today. He writes, starting at verse 13: "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

He says that at the cross, Jesus cancelled the debt that the old covenant law would've required of us, He calls it "legal indebtedness," or some translations say something like "certificate of debt." Jesus took away our condemnation, and He disarmed powers and authorities. And notice Paul's use of pronouns here. It gives us a clue into what he's getting at. He writes to the Gentile believers in Colossae: "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ." He's addressing "you Gentiles." And then he suddenly shifts to first person:

"He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us." The Gentiles who were once "them," have become part of "us"

through their faith in Jesus who cancelled our legal indebtedness on the cross. And if that idea sounds familiar, it's because Paul teaches a very similar thing in Ephesians 2, where he writes this:

"Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' were separate

from Christ, but now you have been brought near by the blood of Christ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.” Paul is making the same basic point in both passages. This is just the kind of thing you would expect to hear from a Jewish teacher who was commissioned by Jesus as His apostle to the Gentiles.

And so in Colossians 2, that passage comes right before verse 16 and 17, so it provides the immediate context for us. Because the next thing Paul writes is this: starting in verse 16:

“Therefore...” And the word “therefore”— in Greek it’s “oun” - is a conjunction. It connects what was previously said to what Paul’s about to say.

He says because of the fact that you Gentiles have been welcomed into God’s people based on your faith, because you have been saved by the work of Christ on the cross who set aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations, who “cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness” and “nailed it to the cross” - Therefore, Paul says, “Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.” I like how the NT scholar Andreas Köstenberger puts it: “Because God has completely reconciled believers to himself, they are free from condemnation and from practicing customs required for God’s covenant people in the past. Against this, the Colossian believers were apparently pressured by some in the church to observe Jewish dietary laws and holy days.” Douglas Mangum puts it this way:

“One element of Paul’s instructions to the Colossians is that they must reject the judgment being placed on them because it is not true. They were apparently being judged due to their lack of obedience to Jewish dietary, festival, and Sabbath rules. Others’ judgment was tempting them to embrace these notions.

Paul has shown that these are unnecessary for salvation, so the Colossians are told not allow themselves to feel belittled for not following these rules.” This is the same thing Paul teaches in Romans 14, where he tells the believers in Rome - which would’ve been a mixture of Jews and Gentiles—not to judge one another based on what they eat or don’t eat, or on which days they do or don’t consider special. He writes this, picking up at verse 5:

“One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.” This is exactly what Paul’s teaching here in Colossians 2.

“Don’t let anyone judge you about these things.” And then in verse 17, Paul explains why they shouldn’t anyone let anyone judge them on such matters. He says: “These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” Paul says those old covenant rituals - the food and the feasts and the new moon and the Sabbath - were shadows, and Jesus is the reality.

He is the substance that those things are pointing to. Köstenberger says this:

“Paul used the words shadow and substance (in Greek those words are “skia” and “soma”) to contrast the incomplete nature of these former obligations with the fullness brought about by Christ. God instituted the dietary laws and holy days as a means to foreshadow the coming reconciliation in Christ.

The actual contrast comes from Jewish eschatology (what was to come) rather than a Platonic dualism (material vs. immaterial). This is another way of saying that he (Jesus) is the fulfilment of the

law.” And in the Hellenized Gentile world Paul is writing to, the contrast of skia and soma—shadow and substance— would’ve resonated with his readers. He’s leveraging vocabulary and categories that would’ve been familiar to Greek-speaking Gentiles in order to make a biblical point. In theological categories, those rituals were the “type”—the earlier, earthly, symbolic reality; the preview, so to speak—and Jesus is what’s called the “antitype.”

He’s the later, greater, ultimate reality that the types were pointing to. This sort of “pattern and fulfilment” relationship is deeply Hebraic and it runs all throughout Scripture. For example, King David was considered a "type" of Christ. So much so, that the Old Testament prophets sometimes referred to the coming Messiah simply as “David.” And in the New Testament, people who recognized Jesus as the Messiah referred to him as “the son of David.” So David was the type, and Jesus the antitype. The Bible also refers to Jesus as the second Adam, and the true Passover Lamb, and the true temple.

These were also types or shadows that pointed to Christ. And here in Colossians 2, Paul says that food and drink and festivals and new moon celebrations and even the Sabbath are types—they’re shadows that point to the antitype: Christ. And because they’re merely skia rather than soma, believers shouldn’t let other people judge them based on whether or not they keep those things. At least that’s what mainstream Christian theology has believed and taught for the last 2,000 years.

And therein lies the rub. That mainstream interpretation completely contradicts with the theology of modern “Torah keepers” who claim that followers of Jesus are, in fact, required to keep all those things.

So the question becomes, how can a modern “Torah keeper” read Colossians 2:16-17 and come away believing that the old covenant rituals are still required? How do they reconcile their theology with a passage like this? Well, they certainly give it the old college try! Let’s take a look at the three most popular ways they try to get those mismatched puzzle pieces to fit together.

### **Claim 1: How We Keep the Rituals**

One common approach Torah-keepers take to get out from under this passage is to reinterpret the nature of Paul’s statement. The claim is that this passage actually teaches that Christians shouldn’t let other people judge them based on how they keep these old covenant rituals, or judge them because they keep those rituals. This approach begins with the assumption that we have to keep those things—this is the idea they’re reading into the text—and from there they reinterpret the passage to conclude that we shouldn’t let other people judge us for keeping these rituals correctly. I’ve asked Torah keepers how they come to that conclusion, and they typically point to the text in this same chapter where Paul addresses pagan observances.

For example, verse 8 says: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.” And verse 18 and following mentions things like the worship of angels, and human commands, and harsh treatment of the body. These were all part of the Colossian Heresy, which again was a mixture of mystical asceticism and pagan philosophy, and also Jewish legalism.

That was part of the heresy, too. And so the “Torah observant” argument here is this: The false teachers in Colossae were mixing all of this stuff together and teaching a pagan way of keeping those rituals that was different from the way the Torah prescribed that they should be kept. And so they read verses 16 and 17 as arguing that we shouldn’t let people judge us because we keep those things

correctly, as the Torah commanded. And quick sidebar issue here: Some even go as far as to claim that the wider context of this chapter shows that Paul was talking about man-made laws, not the Torah. So they conclude that Paul is teaching that we're not to be judged for rejecting man-made laws. But that theory will only get you so far because, sure, pagans had their own versions of some of the things in this list: they had rituals regarding food and drink and festivals and even new moon celebrations.

But there is one big exception: the Sabbath. That was unique to Israel alone, and it's not a man-made law, it was commanded by God. And in fact, there is good reason to read Paul's list as referring specifically to the days commanded in the Torah.

Why?

Because he's using a common Hebraic formula to refer to the full cycle of appointed times. He lists a triad of events that goes from annual, to monthly, to weekly: religious festivals, new moon celebrations, Sabbaths. And that triad of events comes straight from Old Testament, where its used to refer to the fullness of God's appointed times for Israel. So we can't just sweep away this list as entirely man-made laws. Okay, back to the primary claim, which says that this passage teaches that Christians shouldn't let other people judge them because they keep those old rituals correctly. And there are two pretty solid reasons why that interpretation just doesn't work. First, that idea isn't found in the text. It's just not there. If you read through the entire book of Colossians, you know Paul never discusses anything like the corruption of proper Torah rituals, or the right and wrong ways to keep them. There's nothing about that in Colossians or any of his other epistles.

In fact, the topic of how those rituals are to be kept isn't taught anywhere in the NT. The only book in the NT that addresses the old covenant rituals in detail is Hebrews, and that book teaches that those rituals pointed to Jesus and are now obsolete. In fact, the author of Hebrews uses the same kind of "shadow and substance" contrast that we just read in verse 17. Hebrews 10:1 says, "The law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of come instead of the true form of these realities." Sound familiar? Here again the law - and the rituals it required - are labelled as "shadows," and Jesus is the reality they point to. That chapter goes to describe how the Old Testament sacrifices for atonement that were commanded in Leviticus 16 have come to an end.

Because of the "once and for all" sacrifice of Jesus. "There is no longer any offering for sin." So this is the trajectory of the entire New Testament. And therefore, the idea that Paul is trying to encourage his readers to keep the old covenant rituals properly is just untenable.

Frankly, it's a made-up idea. The second problem with the Torah-keeping interpretation here is verse 17. Again, verse 16 says: "Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day." And the question becomes this: If you want to claim this verse is talking about how to keep those things, then how do you account for Paul's own explanation? He says don't let anyone judge you about these things. Why? Verse 17: "These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." This skia and soma contrast is why Paul says don't let anyone judge you. Are we to imagine Paul is concerned that the believers in Colossae need to be careful to properly keep the shadows, even though the reality has already arrived in Christ? No, interpreting this as an endorsement of proper Torah keeping goes against Paul's entire flow of thought here. It renders the text nonsensical.

And nothing in the book of Colossians suggests that Paul wants those rituals to be observed, or that the believers in Colosse are being pressured into not keeping them, or keeping them the wrong way.

No, Paul's argument actually points in the opposite direction. The pressure that the believers in Colossae are feeling, is toward Torah-keeping, not away from it. Paul's entire concern in this epistle is to free Gentiles from unnecessary religious pressure. He warns his readers about imposed rules, and human traditions, and religious regulations.

And this is where many "Torah-keepers" become confused. Because they'll say, "How can you call the commandments that God gave in the Torah 'imposed rules' or 'human traditions'?" And what they're missing is the fact that, although those rituals were commandments given to Israel under the old covenant, under the new covenant they're no longer required of God's people. They're no longer commandments. Again, not because they were abolished, but because they were fulfilled. They achieved their God-ordained purpose in Christ.

And therefore, trying to force new covenant Christians to keep the old covenant rituals absolutely can be seen as imposing rules, or human traditions.

Why?

Because it's not God's will that followers of Jesus keep those things. The New Testament is consistent on that teaching.

I mean, read Acts 15! The Jerusalem Council determined that Gentile believers didn't need to keep any of these things. Read Romans 14, read Galatians. And here in Colossians, Paul isn't addressing Gentiles who are zealously keeping Torah and being criticized for it. No, he's addressing Gentiles who are being pressured to keep those Torah rituals by false teachers.

And Paul says, "Don't let anyone judge you about that." So, the eisegetical claim made by these Torah keepers is the exact opposite of Paul's purpose in writing this letter. He's pointing his readers to the reality and the substance of Jesus, not to the shadows of the old covenant rituals.

## **Claim 2: Things to Come**

The second objection I often hear is based around the way verse 17 is worded. And this is actually why I chose the NIV translation to use today. Because after studying this passage in some depth, I just feel like the NIV, which is a dynamic equivalent translation, does the best job of capturing the intended meaning of the Greek text here. It says:

"These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

In a more formal equivalent translation, the English usually reads a little differently. For example, the ESV renders it this way: "These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." So the NIV says "the things that were to come," but the ESV, which is more literal, says "the things to come." And so, some resourceful Torah-keepers who are trying to get out from under the full weight of this passage, will mount an argument that basically says, "Hey, this verse says that those Torah rituals are a shadow of the things to come.

Which means they're shadows of things still to come in the future kingdom, so we have to still keep them until Christ returns." And here again we find two pretty significant problems. (Well, I guess there are actually three big problems if you include what we just looked at in the previous claim. And I guess a fourth problem would be all those other NT passages I mentioned that all say those things aren't required. But I digress...) The first reason this claim doesn't work is fairly obvious from the context of the passage itself. Paul says those things are a shadow (*skia*), and Christ is the substance (the *soma*). So, those old covenant rituals foreshadowed what?

Jesus. And newsflash, Jesus has already come and inaugurated the New Covenant. That happened in the first century, even before Paul wrote this letter. So the “things to come” Paul is talking about have already come. They were the shadows, Christ is the substance. This isn’t a statement about something still future. And that brings us to the second reason that this “Torah-keeping” interpretation doesn’t work, and it’s why I prefer the NIV for this passage. In Colossians 2:17 the phrase “to come” translates the Greek participle *mellontōn*. And not to nerd out too much here, but in verse 17 that word is used as a plural genitive participle: *tōn mellontōn*—“of the things that are about to come” (or: “of the coming things”). And here’s the thing about the Greek language.

There is a time-perspective to this Greek verb (which is actually acting as a participle) that’s much more nuanced than the simple future tense that we’re used to in English. Greek participles are much more precise than English participles because they encode "aspect" and "relative time" more explicitly and systematically than English does. And that’s what’s going on here. The Greek participle *mellontōn* expresses the “coming” from the time perspective of the shadows themselves— not from the time of Paul’s readers. In other words, those old covenant rituals were given as “a shadow of the things to come” after them. This is why Paul uses present tense for the shadow (“these are a shadow”), and present tense for the substance (“the reality is Christ”).

He’s describing the nature or purpose of the shadows, not their current usefulness. And so I think the NIV renders this participle nicely: “These are a shadow of the things that were to come;” (capturing that relative time element in the Greek) “the reality, however, is found in Christ.”

Here’s the bottom line: What Paul is communicating is that the old covenant rituals were the shadows that pointed us to Christ who is the reality that has already come.

### **Claim 3: The Body of Christ**

This challenge is also based on the wording in verse 17, which says: “These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” But this objection has to do with the Greek word translated here as “reality,” or some translations say “substance.”

That’s the Greek word “*soma*” we’ve been talking about, which literally means "body." In fact, a number of the more literal translations, such as the King James render the passage like this: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”

And what some Torah-keepers will do with this translation is read it like this: “Let no man therefore judge you (about these things) but the body of Christ.” In other words, they claim Paul is saying that we’re not to let man judge us about whether we keep the old covenant rituals, but it is the body of Christ that will judge us. And depending on who you’re talking to, they might say that means that the body of believers in Jesus will judge us, or some will say that Christ himself will judge us if we don’t keep those rituals. And sadly, this is just a simple matter of reading the text carelessly. Torah-keepers who suggest this interpretation are missing a small word that changes everything. Because this translation doesn’t end with “the body of Christ,” but rather “the body is of Christ.” So this passage isn’t referring to the “body of Christ,” as in the collection of believers, or even the physical body of Jesus. It’s saying that those old covenant rituals are a shadow of things to come, but the body, the substance, is of Christ. It is Christ.

So even with these more literal translations that use the English word “body,” they’re still picking up on the fact that Paul is using the Greek words *skia* and *soma*, shadow and body, to contrast the incomplete nature of the old covenant rituals with the fullness brought about by Christ.

### **Bonus Claim: Special Sabbaths**

There’s actually one more popular argument I hear about this passage, and it really doesn’t make sense to me.

I mean, I get what they’re claiming, but I don’t understand why it matters. Maybe you can tell me. The claim is this: When Paul mentions the Sabbath in verse 16, they say that he’s referring to the special Sabbaths that accompanied the feasts, and not the weekly Sabbaths. In the NIV, verse 16 says it this way:

“Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.” Other translations will refer to “Sabbath days,” plural. And I’m not sure what these “Torah-keepers” are trying to prove.

My best guess, although I could be wrong, is they’re somehow trying to preserve the idea that, at the very least, the weekly Sabbath is still required, even if the special Sabbaths aren’t.

The problem is that even if we were to grant this claim, Torah keepers are still left with the fact that the old covenant rituals, which were once part of the law given to Israel, are no longer required. Their theology still collapses. So, I’m not sure what they gain by this argument. And the fact is that their claim goes beyond what the text actually says. In fact, I would say it contradicts it. First of all, Paul makes no distinction in this list between ceremonial Sabbaths and weekly Sabbaths.

None.

The Greek doesn’t suggest that at all. That distinction is another example of eisegesis; it’s a foreign idea being read into the text. Second, as we saw earlier, Paul’s using a common Hebraic formula of listing a triad of events that goes from annual, to monthly, to weekly: religious festivals, a new moon celebration, and Sabbaths. And it’s pretty hard to imagine that he would invoke that Old Testament formula to refer to man-made pagan rituals.

Wrap it up, Solberg.

Here’s the thing with this passage in Colossians 2: There is no way that Paul could’ve written what he wrote if those old covenant rituals were in fact still required of Christians. And when Torah keepers try to re-interpret this passage in such a way that they can retain their theology, what they’re really doing at the end of the day is challenging the sufficiency of Christ. They’re saying Jesus alone isn’t enough, we also need to hang onto those old covenant rituals. But here’s the thing they often miss: because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, quite a few things have changed under the new covenant. For example: We don’t need to sacrifice animals to atone for sin anymore, Jesus was our ultimate “once and for all” sacrifice. And we don’t need a temple anymore, because the body of Christ (we believers) are now the temple of God where He dwells. And we no longer need the Levitical priesthood because Jesus is our new high priest and every believer has been given priestly duties.

And as Colossians 2 clearly says, we also don’t need to keep these appointed days or the diet that God commanded of Israel under the old covenant. Why? Because, as God’s Word says, those things are shadows given to point us to Christ, who is the reality.

Thanks for tuning in... *Shalom*.