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THE SPOILING OF PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS

A Critical Monograph on Colossians 2:15
Abridged by the Author

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"And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it." (Col. 2:15)

The verse of Scripture quoted above is one of those verses which does not yield its value by a surface investigation, but upon greater effort it reveals a wealth of meaning. One writer has called this verse "perhaps the most obscure verse in the New Testament."¹ Another says, "In This difficult verse the meaning of almost every word is disputed."² With this to caution us against a hasty conclusion as to its meaning, let us seek to discover the truth which the apostle Paul was endeavoring to present in this verse.

A bit of background is essential to the understanding of the verse regardless of the final conclusions that may be drawn. The Epistle to the Colossians was written by Paul the Apostle, evidently while he was imprisoned in Rome. It is doubtful whether Paul at the time of his writing the epistle had ever visited Colosse. The question as to who was the founder of the church at Colosse may perhaps never be settled. At any rate, Paul obviously knew of the problems that existed in this church and he wrote this epistle to combat them. The three great errors about which he was concerned were as follows.

First, Lightfoot observes: "A mere glance at the epistle suffices to detect the presence of JUDAISM in the teaching which the apostle combats."³

Second, it seems very probable that the philosophy known as Gnosticism (later to be so widely accepted) was beginning to find its way into the Colossian church. As yet, the philosophy was only in its rudimentary stages, and its elaborate doctrines of aeons, the Demiurge, syzygies, and emanations did not develop until the second century. But the foundations were laid and already "we discover a tendency to interpose certain spiritual agencies, intermediate beings, between God and man, as the instruments of communication and the objects of worship."⁴ The reader should keep this quotation in mind as it has a direct bearing upon our conclusions concerning the meaning of the text in question.

Finally, Essenism was evidently a part of the Colossian heresy. As Vincent states, "The Essenes combined the ritualism of the Jew with the asceticism and mysticism of the Gnostic."⁵ The Essenes were certainly a strange sect and no small part of their beliefs was an elaborate angelology. Part of their requirement for membership was the order "to guard carefully the books of their sect, and the names of the angels."⁶

With this brief survey of the factors contributing to the Colossian heresy, we see that the doctrine of angels forms an important background to the Epistle to the Colossians. Some of the teaching concerning angels was true, being based upon the Old Testament. Some of it was false, being based upon theosophic speculation. No matter what the teaching might be, Paul endeavors in this epistle to point out that God has now revealed Himself completely in the Person of His Son and therefore angels must not be worshipped or depended upon for further revelations. Jesus Christ alone is the One to whom all must look for salvation. Having observed this much as a background to the epistle, let us approach the verse in question.

MAJOR PROBLEM: What is the Meaning of the Phrase, "having spoiled principalities and powers?"

A number of views have been advanced by various theologians in answer to this question. A brief review of them is in order.

Victory over Temptation View. Lightfoot, who has written one of the finest commentaries upon the Colossian Epistle, is perhaps the chief spokesman for this view. He holds that Christ, throughout His earthly life, was continually being tempted by Satan. Every time Satan tempted our Lord he was defeated, of course. However, it was at the cross where the final victory was achieved. There it was that "the powers of evil, which had clung like a Nessus robe about His humanity, were torn off and cast aside forever."⁷ This is taken to be the explanation of the spoiling of principalities and powers. It was the final victory over temptation which the cross provided for our Lord. This view is also taken by the early Greek fathers, Chrysostom, Severianus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and others. Wordsworth and Ellicott likewise support it.⁸

The greatest single objection to this view is that it necessitates supposing that Christ was in some way "clothed" in evil. One cannot deny that Christ was tempted by Satan throughout His ministry, but it is something else to say He was "clothed" in evil. Jesus Christ had complete victory over temptation at all times, no more so at the time of His death than at any other time. Psalm 40:12, usually considered to be a Messianic Psalm, might seem to support this view by saying, "innumerable evils have compassed me about," but it is doubtful whether this verse even applies to Christ. Hengstenberg argues, "That the Psalmist speaks here of his numerous offences, and treats of his suffering as the righteous punishment of these, forms an irrefragable proof against the direct Messianic exposition."⁹

Another Old Testament passage cited by Lightfoot is Zech. 3:1-4, where Joshua the high priest (considered by Lightfoot as a type of Christ) stands in a vision before the angel of the Lord, clothed in filthy garments. These garments are removed in order that he might continue to stand before the angel. This is supposed to be typical of what Christ does in Col. 2:15. This writer feels that this is certainly an obscure and weak support upon which to rest an interpretation of Scripture. The metaphor does not seem to fit at all, since Joshua in this passage is not the angel of the Lord (the Jesus of the Old Testament)¹⁰ but stands before the angel of the Lord.

This view assumes that the principalities and powers must have been Satanic forces. Although this is often the case, the words themselves have no evil connotation and the context must determine whether the powers are good or evil. This is a problem to be discussed briefly in this monograph.

Putting off Flesh View. This view, which is simply a variation of the view just presented, holds that Christ gained victory over the powers of evil by the act of laying aside His flesh. The view is not widely held by commentators but apparently was the basis for an interpolation in certain manuscripts. Beet remarks that "this exposition has found its way into the Mss. F and G, which read 'having laid aside the flesh, He made a show' etc."¹¹ Sadler seems to incline toward this view. He says:

The meaning of this extremely difficult verse seems to be this: Christ put off from Himself principalities and powers, i. e., the powers of evil, when He divested Himself of His body, for it was only through His body that the spirits of evil had power over Him.¹²

In rejecting this view, we observe in the first place that the manuscript evidence is scarcely worthy of consideration. Codices F and G are ninth century manuscripts much too late to be of any great value in determining a true text. Beet says, "Probably the word 'flesh' was an explanatory note which was afterwards copied into the text: a frequent source of error in the text of the N.T."¹³

Furthermore, the entire passage under consideration is obviously a victorious one rather than one of defeat. If it was necessary for Christ to lay aside His flesh in order to spoil principalities and powers, this is to concede that He was in some sense defeated by Satan during His earthly existence. As we have stated before, we do not believe that Jesus Christ was ever defeated by Satan and therefore we cannot subscribe to any view that might suggest this.

Another objection is that Christ never did lay aside His flesh, at least not permanently. Scripture makes it clear that Jesus Christ lives today in heaven in human flesh and therefore anyone who holds this view must explain what is meant by "putting off the body."

Finally, it should be mentioned that 2 Cor. 5:4 has been used in support of this view. This verse uses the verb ekduo (a cognate of apekduomai, the verb in Col. 2:15) where the meaning is clearly that of putting off the body. However, there the entire context supports such a meaning whereas in Colossians it would be introducing a new thought rather abruptly. Simply a word which means "to put off" is used in one context to mean "putting off flesh" does not in any way necessitate its meaning that in every usage.

Disarming of Satan View. This view holds that, at the time referred to by this verse (usually considered to be either at the death of Christ or at His ascension) Satan was disarmed of his power in the world and his doom was sealed. This differs from the two views just presented in that this victory over Satan is directly beneficial to all of mankind, whereas the former views concern only a personal victory for Christ. Daille expresses this view as follows:

Surely then it is by his cross that he divested the devils of the dominion which they exercised over mankind, having sapped and demolished all the foundations thereof by his admirable sufferings.¹⁴

The great majority of commentators hold this view. Among these are Meyer, Moule, Eadie, Barnes, and Braune. However, the arguments against this view seem to this writer to be sufficient to lead one to search for a more satisfying interpretation.

This view does not convey the force of the middle voice of apekdusamenos. The middle voice indicates that "the subject is acting in relation to himself somehow."¹⁵ Robertson says, "So in Col. 2:15, apekdusamenos tas archas, it is not 'undress,' but 'throw off from one's self.'"¹⁶ The Victory over Temptation View, although unsatisfactory for other reasons, at least observes the middle voice, for it pictures Christ as putting off from Himself the principalities and powers. We believe that the idea of "spoiling" or "disarming" is an erroneous interpretation which stems from the Vulgate translation, exspolians. To retain this meaning is to treat a middle voice as an active. When the middle voice is preserved, we are given an important proof for the New Dispensation View to be discussed below.

Furthermore, the context of the passage under discussion is important here. There can be no doubt that the death of Christ dealt a stunning blow to Satan and his hosts. However, the question here is, does Paul refer to the disarming of Satan in this passage or does he have something entirely different in mind? When Paul wrote to the Colossian church, he was obviously attacking a heresy prevalent in that church, namely, the worship of angels. This is clearly seen in 2:18. Furthermore, he is showing in this context that the cross brought about the abolition of the law (verses 14, 16, 17). As Vincent argues, "How is the fact that Christ triumphed over the infernal hosts relevant to His abrogating the legal bond in His crucifixion?"¹⁷ In other words, the Disarming of Satan View changes the subject completely between verses 14 and 16.

Space does not permit here a lengthy discussion of the word thriambeusas which is translated "triumphing" in the King James Version. However, G.G. Findlay has shown that this word need not be understood as a military triumph in the Roman sense, but rather can be taken as a celebration such as the Greeks might conduct in honor of their gods.¹⁸ If this be the correct understanding, then the Disarming of Satan View is robbed of one of its supporting proofs. Instead of a conquest, which is the expression which might have been used of Satan's defeat, a peaceful celebration is indicated.

Destruction of False Religions View. This view is a variation of the above. It holds that the heathen religions which were so prevalent in the days of Christ were somehow revealed to be utterly false by the death of Christ. Since Satan was behind these religions, he was thus disarmed of power. Benson takes this view and cites Hammond, Whitby and others who agree with it.¹⁹

This view has been disproved by history. False religions are as prevalent today as they ever were. Furthermore, the force of the middle voice in apekdusamenos is ignored, and the context does not support such an interpretation nearly so well as it does the view we now propose.

New Dispensation View. This view (based on the assumption that the principalities and powers are angels, not demons) regards the verse as describing a turning point in God's dealing with men. Those who hold this view understand it to mean that, whereas formerly angels had ministered the law (according to Gal. 3:19 and other passages), now Christ is the only mediator between God and men. Vincent says,

God put off from himself, when the bond of the law was rendered void in Christ's crucifixion, that ministry of angels which waited on the giving of the law, revealing Christ as the sole mediator, the head of every principality and power.²⁰

Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.

Nothing could be clearer than this that angels were extremely important in the dispensation of the law. The Jews in Paul's day no doubt exaggerated and confused the position of angels, but they were correct in giving them a part in the dispensation of the law. Smith observes that Josephus tells of an incident where Herod excited the Jews to battle "by a speech in which he says that they have learned the holiest of laws from God through angels. In such a speech one does not introduce doubtful points of theology."²²

In Acts 7:53 one finds another instance where angels are mentioned as dispensing the law. Stephen says concerning his Jewish audience: "Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it."²²

In the Old Testament we find numerous references to angels fulfilling important ministries. Findlay observes:

The Old Testament associates the angels with the creation of the world and the action of the powers of nature (Job xxxviii. 7; Ps. civ. 4), and with its great theophanies generally (Ps. lxxviii. 7; Deut. xxxiii. 2; 2 Kings vi. 17, etc.)²³

As for the angels having a part in the giving of the law in the Old Testament, Smith remarks:

It is frequently assumed that this doctrine is not to be found in the Old Testament, and that reference to the angels as appearing on Sinai is distinctly made for the first time in the Septuagint of Deuteronomy xxxiii. 2: 'On his right hand his angels with Him.' But, in reality, the presence of angels at the Theophany of Sinai is plainly taught in Psalm lxvii. 17. For the myriad chariots of God, which, according to this Psalm, accompany his manifestation alike on Sion and on Sinai, are the angelic host (2 Kings vi. 17).²⁴

Finally, "the whole argument in Heb. i., ii., especially ii. 2 'the word spoken by the agency of angels,' implies that they were the medium through which the revelations of the Old Covenant were given."²⁵ In the face of these Scriptures, we believe that no one can justly claim that the New Dispensation View is not supported by the rest of Scripture.

MINOR PROBLEMS

A number of questions incidental to the main problem present themselves in a study of this verse. We present them here briefly.

1. Who is the subject of this verse? Two possibilities present themselves. Either God (the Father) is the subject or Christ is the subject. Dawson-Walker expresses the argument for making God the subject as follows:

...the demands of general sense and context seem best to be met by regarding God as the subject of the verbs throughout the passage. St. Paul is describing the work that He wrought in the crucifixion of our Lord.²⁶

On the other hand, those who adhere to the Victory over Temptation View or the Putting off Flesh View of the Major Problem are compelled to make Christ the subject of the verse.

This writer believes that the subject of this verse is God the Father. We agree with Meyer who says, "the reference to Christ is erroneous, because Christ is not mentioned at all in ver. 14, and God pervades as subject the entire discourse from ver. 11 onwards."²⁷ There is simply no sufficient reason for introducing a new subject, since nothing is said that cannot be applied to God as well as to Christ. Although there is no reason to introduce a new subject, there is good reason to retain the old subject ("God" in verse 13). It was God who allowed angels to be the mediators of His law. It was the Father who sent His Son to die on the cross, thus "blotting out the hand-writing of ordinances that was against us." It was the Father who made us alive together with Christ. God is the agent of every action concerning our salvation mentioned in verses 12 to 15. This in no way undermines the importance of Christ's ministry. There are many passages which portray Christ's saving work, where He alone is the subject. This passage simply gives another side to the picture, showing us the Father's participation in the Son's ministry.

2. What are the principalities and powers? The most common interpretation is that these are Satanic forces. Eadie says,

Hostile spiritual powers are plainly designated. Their reign over man had its origin in his sin; and their usurpation lasted till sin was atoned for, and its power destroyed. Hence Satan is called the 'god' and 'prince of this world.' (Ephes. ii. 2;) Luke xi. 22.28

Other views are that the principalities and powers may refer to false gods, human governments (as in Tit. 3:1) or to angels. That the phrase refers to angels is the opinion of this writer. Among those who take this view are Findlay, Peake, Alford, Beet, and Vincent.

The most compelling argument for this view is that of context. There can be little doubt that the apostle Paul is attacking heresies which include angel worship (2:18). Therefore, it is certainly not straining the sense to understand the principalities and powers to refer to angels, which the apostle declares were divested of their mediatorial office when Christ died. The two other occurrences of the phrase in the Epistle to the Colossians support the view we have taken. The first occurrence is in 1:16, where a list is given of things created by the pre-incarnate Christ. Among these were "principalities and powers." This verse closes with the statement: "All things were created by him, and for him." We cannot conceive of Christ creating evil angels. All that He created was good. The second occurrence of the phrase, this time using singular nouns, is in chapter two, verse ten. This verse reads: "And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power." Here again, we believe good angels are indicated. It is strange that many of those who favor the Satanic forces interpretation of 2:15 are willing to admit that these other uses of the phrase refer to angels. We believe there is no reason for Paul to be inconsistent in his use of terminology. In every instance in this epistle the phrase refers to unfallen angels.

3. What is the meaning of the phrase, "he made a shew of them openly."? The writer has discovered two leading views concerning the meaning of this phrase. Each one contributes to a different interpretation of the general meaning of the verse.

a. Public Disgrace View. This view holds that the principalities and powers were exhibited as beaten foes and made an object of ridicule by those who were the spectators. This view is based on the assumption that the principalities and powers are Satanic forces. The qualifying phrase, en parresiaj, is understood to mean that great publicity was given to the shame which the principalities and powers experienced.

This view is rejected chiefly for contextual reasons. The meaning of the word deigmatidzo is "to make a show of, to expose."²⁹ This may indicate an exposure of disgrace or it may not. Usually, when disgrace is involved, the compound word paradeigmatidzo is used, as in Heb. 6:6. When deigmatidzo is used to indicate an exhibition involving disgrace, it is necessary for the context to supply this connotation. Unless one sees in the word "triumphing" (thriambeusas) such a connotation, we see no compelling reason to accept this view. The latter word will be discussed briefly in this monograph.

b. Revelation of Character View. This view attaches no shame to the meaning of the phrase in question. It holds that God, by the sacrifice of His Son, revealed the principalities and powers (here considered to be angels) in their true character and position. They were shown to be subordinate to our Lord. Their office of ministering the law was now ended and God, by "exposing" (edeigmatisen) them, showed once and for all that they must not be worshipped or regarded superstitiously, as verse 18 indicates was the common practice. The writer of this paper believes that this view best answers the demands of context and general sense. With this interpretation we have a powerful reminder that angels are subordinate to the Godhead and though they have their purpose, they are never to be worshipped. They, as well as we, belong to that joyous procession giving honor to our God and Saviour.

4. In what sense is the word thriambeusas ("triumphing") used?

a. Military Conquest View. This view understands thriambeusas to refer to a Roman triumphal procession. Thus the metaphor Paul is using is one of conquest, where the victor leads the vanquished foe in disgrace before the spectators.

We reject this interpretation and invite the interested reader to study the remarks of Findlay on the subject.³⁰ His argument, which is too detailed to reproduce here, is that it is more likely that the apostle Paul would be thinking in terms of Greek customs rather than Roman customs as he wrote to the Colossians. The Romans were famous for their parades of vanquished enemies, but the Greeks had a different type of parade for which they were noted.

b. Festal Chorus View. This makes thriambeuo refer not to a Roman triumph, which was the result of a great battle, but rather to a festal chorus of the Greeks, a religious celebration. Such processions were common to the worshippers of Dionysus. Findlay has endeavored to prove that Paul is thus showing by means of metaphor how Christ led the angels in a procession as they paid honor to Him.³¹ Both Beet and Vincent accept Findlay's conclusion. It is the view of this writer.

The enthusiasm, the joy, and religious character of these Greek processions must have impressed the apostle Paul deeply and he used them as an illustration of the new relationship between Christ and the angels. Thus Findlay concludes:

He [God] has formed them into a festal chorus, who 'follow the Lamb whatsoever he goeth,' hymning his praises, enraptured with his glory, devoted to his service, themselves Christ's first and chief enthusiasts.³²

5. What is the antecedent of en autoi ("in it")?

As with the first minor problem, this question arises from Paul's rather free grammatical style. In what was God's triumph? The noncommittal "it" of most of our versions gives no clue whatsoever.

a. Cross View. This view makes stauroi, the last word of verse 14, the antecedent. Thus it was in the cross of Christ that principalities and powers were triumphed over. This writer believes that this view fits best the general context. The word stauroi is the most logical antecedent, since it is not only very close to autoi but also makes very good sense because it was by the cross of Christ that the dispensation of the law, formerly ministered by principalities and powers, was brought to an end.

b. Christ View. The view that Christ is the antecedent of autoi was held sufficiently early in history to have produced a variant reading (hautoi) in some manuscripts. However, since there has been no direct reference to Christ since verse 13 (the words "his cross" in verse 14 should read "the cross") there is no reason to search any further than stauroi for an antecedent. We believe that this view is not nearly so acceptable as the one mentioned above.

c. Handwriting View. This view makes the handwriting (cheirophon) of verse 14 the antecedent of autoi. The idea is that by abolishing the cheirophon God triumphed over its administrators. The writer rejects this view, not only because cheirophon is further removed from autoi than is stauroi but also because "it is the cancelling of the bond, not the bond itself, that is the cause of the triumph."³³ As one reads the passage, he has the impression that, whatever autoi refers to, it shares in the triumph with the subject of the verse, which we believe is God. The handwriting was blotted out (verse 14). It, therefore, has ceased to exist at the time of which verse 15 speaks. Therefore, how could the handwriting aid God to share with God in triumphing over the principalities and powers? Only the cross (which to Christianity is the symbol of a completed redemption) or Christ could be regarded as having a part in God's triumph. We believe the cross is meant here, "for although in the cross there is nothing but curse, it was, nevertheless, swallowed up by the power of God in such a way, that it has put on, as it were, a new nature."³⁴

PARAPHRASE

To conclude then, we would suggest that this difficult verse be paraphrased in the following manner:

God stripped off from Himself, as though it were a garment, the veil of angelic mediation by which the law had formerly been ministered, and revealed unreservedly the true character of these angels, all of whom were inferior to Himself. In doing so, He received the homage of the angels whom he had deposed. The cross was the means whereby this new dispensation was introduced.

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