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Some Thoughts on Col. 2,17–18

When reviewing the first edition of the UBS Greek New Testament, I made a brief comment about the general need to re-examine punctuation and *verse division* and, with reference to the passage I now wish to consider, I made a passing remark as follows:¹ “Since there appears no satisfactory explanation of the *skiá/sôma* antithesis at Col. ii 17, perhaps we could repunctuate with the stop after *mellóntōn* and link the *sôma* with the following verb?” This remark has called forth at least two comments. E. Lohse mentions the remark and describes the proposal as “wide of the mark”.² R. H. Gundry discusses the suggestion in some detail, seems worried about the proposal from the point of view of word-order and explains the usual punctuation as arising from a parallelism between the terms *skiá* and *sôma* or at least between the phrases containing these terms.³ I think there is still room here for some further remarks by way of an attempt at elucidation.

1.

There seems little or no evidence from Classical Greek for the use of *sôma* in the sense of “substance” or “reality” and the Platonic terms would appear rather to be *parádeigma* and *eikōn* for the original and the copy respectively.

There would appear, however, to be at least four clear examples from later usage which incorporate the same juxtaposition of *skiá* and *sôma* as is implied in the usual punctuation of the Greek here and as is reflected in the translations of AV RV Moffatt RSV and NEB:

a) Philo, *De conf. ling.* 190 (II, 265, 28): ... *nomísantas tà mèn rētà tôn chrēsmōn skiás tinas hōsaneì sōmátōn eínai* ...

b) Philo, *Quis rer. div.* 71–2 (III, 17, 10): *etólma gār tólmēma ou mikrón, dià skiōn moi sōmata, dià rēmátōn prágmata, háper amēchanon ên, deiknýnai* ...

c) Josephus, *Bell. Jud.* 2, 28: *nŷn hēkei parà toũ despótou skiàn aitēsómenos basileías, hēs ērpsen heautō tò sōma* ...

d) Lucian, *Hermotimus* 79: *ē oũn ouchì kai orthōs tis faîē tēn skiàn hymās thēreúein eásantas tò sōma* ...

It still seems logically strange that the author of Col. condemns any interest in eating, drinking, festivals, new moons and sabbaths, and then gives them a place in his future scheme (unless perhaps with this writer also – I suspect not Paul – sentiment was stronger than logic). When J. L. Houlden says: “Like Heb. 10¹ Paul contrasts the *past* validity of the Law, within certain limits, with its present supersession (cf. Gal. 3²⁴)”,⁴ he seems to me to get the gist of the meaning and intention of the passage, but in doing so he does violence both to the tenses and the actual content of the Greek. It is, of course, possible to point to the notion of the Law as a *paidagōgós* and to read the same thought into this passage with the help of Rom. 5, 14: *hós estin týpos toũ mellontos*, Heb. 8, 5: *hoítines hypodeígmati kai skiâ latréuousin tôn epouraníōn*, and Heb. 10, 1: *skiàn gār échōn, ho nómos tôn mellōnton agathōn* ..., though it should be said that the language is not quite identical and the use of *tôn mellōntōn* in Col. 2, 17 is much more neutral than in Heb. 10, 1, where the qualification *agathōn* is introduced.

If anything, the concerns listed are surely a thing of the past and not of the future. Indeed, if it were not too much of a lift from the poets, *skià tôn molóntōn*, “a shadow of things that are gone”, would be a much more appropriate reading. E. F. Scott says rightly: “On these practices Paul passes his judgment.” But he also sees the futurist implications and continues:

¹ I. A. Moir, *Review: N.T. Stud.* 14 (1967), p. 142.

² E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, ed. by W. R. Poehlmann & R. J. Harris (1971), p. 157.

³ R. H. Gundry, *Sôma in Biblical Theology* (1976), pp. 42–43.

⁴ J. L. Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (1970), p. 196.

“Himself a Jew, Paul cannot admit that the most sacred ordinances of Judaism are worthless shadows.”⁵

It is of interest too that the phrase *skià tôn mellóntōn* appears to have no LXX ancestry. In the LXX the most usual association for *skià* is the phrase *skià toû thanátou*. Could it by chance be that the phrase used here is intended as an equivalent euphemism? This again would make appropriate sense and we find an expression which comes within reach of this sense in Mark 10, 32: *êrxato autoîs légein tà méllonta autô symbaínein*.

Can it be that classically trained scholars, readily accepting the notion of a shadow-reality contrast, have been too quick here to get out their “meccano sets” to lay an explanatory foundation for this passage by a bit of bolting up of Romans and Hebrews?

2.

Before I accept this contrast as essential to the meaning of the passage, I should like to draw attention to one or two other features which deserve to be looked at.

There is perhaps some ground for hesitating to translate the genitive *toû Christoû* with either simple “of” or with some phrase implying “belonging to”. There may be examples of such usage but the grammars do not abound in them. Much more usual is the construction with *ek* or some other preposition, such as one finds in 1 Cor. 15, 47: *ho prôtos ánthrōpos ek gês choîkós*, *ho deúteros ánthrōpos ex ouranoû*, to give only one example. Perhaps the nearest we can come in the N.T. to this expression is in 2 Thess. 3, 2: *ou gàr pántōn hē pístis*.

Even if the construction is allowed in the sense in which it is usually taken, the apparatus of Tischendorf in his 8th edition gives a long list of witnesses for the omission of the article *toû* before *Christoû*. These witnesses include Sin^c and D and to this evidence can now be added that of P⁴⁶. Further, in working through many of the later manuscripts of Col., I have observed that, in many cases, they also favour the omission of the article. This alternative reading would seem to me to make the usual translation of the verse unlikely, if not impossible.

Account must now be taken of the further interesting note in Tischendorf’s apparatus, 2, p. 737, which seems worth quoting in full: *to de sōm. t. chr.: Chr⁴²⁸ hoî dé: tò sōma christoû mēdeîs hymâs katabrabeuētō, toutéstin epēreazētō. Eadem Thphyl. Confirmant autem coniunctionen hanc A (a “to de” novum versum incipiens) B P (vdtr. et Sin) al; item aeth: Et non sit qui contemnat vos propter corpus Christi . . . g corpus autem Christi estis.*

It is quite clear from the facsimile that Alexandrinus makes a fresh start here with a high point after *mellóntōn* and a space of two letters before writing the *tó*. Vaticanus here also uses a high point after *mellóntōn* and follows this with a single letter blank space which is used on an average only about twice per page. Sinaiticus is not quite so certain since its left-hand margins at this point are somewhat shaky, but Tischendorf’s comment arises from the fact that the MS starts a new line with *tó* and appears to push the word sufficiently into the left margin of the column to suggest a new beginning. For P (025 in Leningrad) we can perhaps accept Tischendorf’s evidence drawn from his transcription in *Monumenta sacra inedita*, 5 (Leipzig, 1865), pp. 259–260. P has a high point after *sabbátōn* and *mellóntōn* and mid points after *Christoû*, *katabrabeuētō* and *angélōn*. It is perhaps difficult, however, to rely on the evidence of P since the scribe, according to Tischendorf (Introduction, p. XVII), is a bit erratic in his use of punctuation.

3.

I would want to argue in the light of this evidence that there is a case for abandoning the attempt to see in this verse a contrast, other than an implied one, between the items at the beginning of the verse and the “body” or “substance” as belonging to Christ. *Col. 2, 17b* would then be *attached to 18a* and could be translated: “But (or ‘see that you’) let no one deprive

⁵ E. F. Scott, *Colossians* (1930), p. 52.

you of / defraud you of / do you out of / exclude you from / the body of Christ, in his desire to engage you in . . .”⁶

My main hesitation about this rendering is that it requires that *katabrabeuētō* be construed with two accusatives. It is in any case a rare word, not even listed in many smaller dictionaries, and it is thus difficult to get evidence for its grammatical behaviour. One would perhaps expect a “genitive of separation” as more normal with such a verb. However, two examples from Demosthenes of the double accusative with the very similar verb *apostereō* suggest that the construction might well be appropriate here also.

a) Demosthenes, *Katà Aphóbou* II, 839, 13: *hóti echthròs ánthrōpos kai tà hēméterā hemās apostereî*.

b) Idem, *Katà Philíppou* I, 54, 50: *allà kai toútōn tèn timèn apostereîs me, málista tálanton*.

Gundry suggests as an objection to the proposed re-arrangement that “the motif of the ecclesiastical Body of Christ is not picked up till a number of phrases later (v. 19)”. But it seems to me that the idea is already implied and on the way to development in vv. 6–7, “so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith”, and also in vv. 9–10, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”

I am not sure that the suggestion made here is the last word about a set of difficult phrases in a notoriously difficult chapter, but I feel it merits consideration as much as the usual explanation. A further look at both possibilities together and at the whole chapter might produce further light in the near darkness which hangs over so much of Col.

In passing I should report that the later scribes of Col. are not given to making many alterations in the TR text of 18b: *hà mẽ heōraken embateúōn*, which has proved such a happy hunting ground for emendation and conjecture. This suggests to me that the TR reading here made more acceptable sense than we are accustomed to think and interpretation of the verse should proceed on that basis.

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⁶ Scott (n. 5), pp. 53–54.

⁷ Gundry (n. 3).