

DECODING THE “SABBATH” OF COLOSSIANS 2:16

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“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a *sabbath*” (Col 2:16, RSV, emphasis added).

From the earliest apologetic writings of Seventh-day Adventists until approximately 1960 there appears to have been essential unanimity in Adventist publications that the term *sabbata* in Col 2:16 refers to the annual sabbaths of ancient Israel, and not to the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue.¹ While this has remained the standard position of the denomination,² during the past several decades there has been an increasing number of primarily scholarly-oriented works postulating that Paul was indeed referring to the seventh-day Sabbath when he used the word *sabbata* in his Epistle to the

¹ See, for example, James White, “Scriptures Usually Quoted to Prove the Abolition of the Sabbath, Examined,” *The Present Truth* 1.2 (1849): 10; Uriah Smith, *Synopsis of the Present Truth: A Brief Exposition of the Views of S. D. Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing, 1884), 84; John Nevins Andrews, *History of the Sabbath and First Day of the Week*, 3rd rev. ed. (Battle Creek, MI: Review & Herald, 1887), 1:83–92; O. A. Olsen, *Bible Text-Book* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1900), 92; Carlyle B. Haynes, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1928), 28–30; M. L. Andreasen, *The Sabbath* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1942), 213–17; Francis D. Nichol, *Answers to Objections* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1952), 92–95, 153–54, 165–70; *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1957), 130–31, 151, 367, 386, 622.

² See, for example, Roy B. Thurmon, *The Sabbath Today: A Reply to A. G. Hobbs* (Nashville: Southern, 1962), 52–57; Dwight P. Herbert, *Saturday, Sunday, and Salvation: Twenty Five Reasons for Sunday Observance Examined* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1980), 25–28; Kenneth H. Wood, “The ‘Sabbath Days’ of Colossians 2:16, 17,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, DC: Review & Herald), 338–342; *Seventh-day Adventists Believe ...: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, 3rd ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2018), 280, 292.

Colossians.³ In general, the historic Adventist position was based upon essentially two concepts, which will be briefly reviewed first before considering additional issues related to the meaning and significance of the *sabbata* in this passage.⁴

1. The Setting: Traditional/Original Contextual Approach

In the second issue of *The Present Truth*, the official Adventist Church news magazine (and a precursor to the current *Adventist Review*), James White argued that in Col 2:16, “Paul does not speak of ‘the Sabbath-day’ which is associated with the other nine moral laws; but, the sabbath-days, which are associated with ‘meat,’ ‘drink,’ and ‘new-moons’ in the ceremonial laws of Moses.”⁵ Within seven months, J. White again addressed this passage, but now he added an additional contextual argument, based on the KJV rendering of Col 2:14:

- ³ See, for example, William Edwin Richardson, “A Study of the Historical Background and the Interpretation of Colossians 2:14–17” (MA thesis, Andrews University, 1960), 91; Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), 364; Desmond Ford, *The Forgotten Day* (Newcastle, CA: Desmond Ford Publications, 1981), 115; H. Ross Cole, “The Sacred Times Prescribed in the Pentateuch: Old Testament Indicators of the Extent of Their Applicability” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1996), 282, 355–58; Mxolisi Michael Sokupa, “Σκιά των Μελλόντων in Col 2:17: An Interpretation” (PhD diss., Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 2009), 208, 218; Edwin Reynolds, review of *Judging the Sabbath: Discovering What Can’t Be Found in Colossians 2:16*, by Ron du Preez, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 47.2 (2009): 281; Sanghoon Jee, “Interpretation of Σαββάτων in Colossians 2:16: Weekly Seventh-day Sabbath or Yearly Ceremonial Sabbath or Weekdays” (paper presented at the 3rd International Scholars’ Conference, Adventist University of Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia, 21–22 October 2015), 12; Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 358n43; Kim Papaioannou, *Israel, Covenant, Law: A Third Perspective on Paul* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 129–39.
- ⁴ For an in-depth investigation of this topic, see Ronald Alwyn Gerald du Preez, “A Critical Analysis of the Word Σαββάτων in Colossians 2:16” (PhD diss., University of the Western Cape, 2018).
- ⁵ J. White, “Scriptures Usually Quoted,” 10 (emphasis original).

It was the "hand-writing of ordinances" written in the book of the law by the *hand of Moses* that was "blotted out," and not that which was spoken from Mount Sinai, and *engraven* in stone with the *finger of God*.⁶

Though there is essentially no evidence that any lexical-linguistic exegesis was done on the three crucial concepts in Col 2:16 (i.e., "feast," "new moon," and "sabbath"), the notion that "ceremonial sabbaths" are in view here has remained the standard position of the church. As recently as 2018, the significant volume *Seventh-day Adventists Believe ...: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* produced by the Ministerial Association of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church⁷ states:

At the death of Christ the jurisdiction and the function of the ceremonial law came to an end. His atoning sacrifice provided forgiveness for all sins. This act "wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Col 2:14; cf. Deut 31:26). Then it was no longer necessary to perform the elaborate ceremonies that were not, in any case, able to take away sins or purify the conscience (Heb 10:4; 9:9, 14). No more worries about the ceremonial laws, with their complex requirements regarding food and drink offerings, celebrations of various festivals (Passover, Pentecost, etc.), new moons, or ceremonial sabbaths (Col 2:16; cf. Heb 9:10), which were only a "shadow of things to come" (Col 2:17).⁸

In a subsequent chapter, the book reiterates, stating, "Since 'the context [of this passage] deals with ritual matters, the sabbaths here referred to are the ceremonial sabbaths of the Jewish annual festivals.'"⁹ The scholarly *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, produced by the Adventist Church's Biblical Research Institute, affirms: "The context of Colossians 2:14 indicates regulations having to do with ceremonial celebrations and food (v. 16)."¹⁰ This "contextual" position, however, is challenged primarily

⁶ James White, "'Seventh-day Sabbath Abolished,' by Eld. Marsh, Editor of the 'Advent Harbinger and Bible Advocate,'" *The Present Truth* 1.7 (1850): 52 (emphases originally in capitals now replaced with italics).

⁷ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 292 (emphasis added, brackets original).

¹⁰ Mario Veloso, "The Law of God," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 477.

by non-Adventists,¹¹ as well as some Adventist academics as footnoted above.¹²

2. The “Substance”: Historic Adventist Typological Understanding

In his second article on the “sabbath-days” of Col 2:16, J. White strengthened his argument that this referred to ceremonial sabbaths by noting that “the [seventh-day] Sabbath is not a shadow, for it is to be observed as long as the New Heavens and New Earth remain,”¹³ thus implying that those mentioned in Colossians were actually types pointing to Christ. Or as W. E. Read later put it: “The Sabbath of the Lord, the seventh day of the week, is a *memorial*, not a *type*. The memorial looks back; the type looks forward.”¹⁴ In the words of foremost nineteenth-century Adventist Bible scholar, John Nevins Andrews: “The whole typical system was abolished, having

¹¹ See, for example, the list of dozens of commentaries that conclude that *sabbata* here refers to the weekly Sabbath in Ron du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath: Discovering What Can't Be Found in Colossians 2:16* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2008), 174–77.

¹² In the only known reference to Col 2:16 in her writings, Ellen G. White makes a cursory reference to the apparently “contextual” manner in which the early pioneers seemed to generally understand and explain this passage: “On every side we hear discussion of the subjects presented at the camp-meeting. One day as Elder Corliss stepped out of a train, the guard [i.e., the conductor] stopped him with the request that he explain Colossians 2:16. They stopped, and as the crowd rushed by, the explanation was given, and from Leviticus 23:37, 38 it was shown that there were sabbaths besides the Sabbath of the Lord.” Ellen G. White, “The Australian Camp-Meeting,” *Review and Herald* 73.1 (1896): 2. The above account, when contrasted with E. White’s discussion of the weekly Sabbath in relation to “typology,” is quite illuminating: “In Eden, God set up the memorial of His work of creation, in placing His blessing upon the seventh day. The Sabbath was committed to Adam, the father and representative of the whole human family.... Thus the institution was wholly commemorative, and given to all mankind. There was nothing in it shadowy or of restricted application to any people.” Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1890), 48. “There is no shadow in the precepts of the decalogue. The ten commandments are not a type. God gave his law, and in the fourth precept of the decalogue is his Sabbath.” Ellen G. White, “Obedience to the Law Necessary,” *Review and Herald* 67.28 (1890): 1.

¹³ J. White, “Seventh-day Sabbath Abolished,” 52.

¹⁴ W. E. Read, “More on Colossians 2:14 (Part 1)” *Ministry* 46.1 (1973): 47 (emphases original).

reached the commencement of its anti-type, when our Lord Jesus Christ expired upon the cross."¹⁵

Approaching the content of Col 2:16 typologically, Frank B. Holbrook explains at length:

Verse 17 is the key to the passage inasmuch as it identifies the nature of the "handwriting of ordinances." According to this verse "the handwriting of ordinances" dealt with the ceremonial system—with the shadow-types ("a shadow of things to come").... In other words the apostle Paul is speaking of ... the *typical* feasts/festivals and the new moon feasts, and of the ... ceremonial sabbaths (see Lev 23). All these items had their part in the system to foreshadow the coming Messiah and aspects of His death and priesthood.¹⁶

Echoing this typological position, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* notes: "With Jesus' death, believers no longer had any need to deal with shadows—reflections of the reality in Christ. Now they could approach the Savior Himself directly, for the 'substance is of Christ' (Col 2:17)."¹⁷ In a later chapter, this standard volume affirms that *sabbata* refers to "the ceremonial sabbaths of the Jewish annual festivals "which are a shadow," or type, of which the fulfillments were to come in Christ."¹⁸ In consonance, Mario Veloso states: "With the death of Christ the ceremonial system that pointed forward to Christ as the culmination of the entire legal system came to an end."¹⁹ This typological perspective has been basically affirmed in the April–June 2014 *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*.²⁰ About two years after that, on 11 July 2016, the Bible study guide made reference to "the ceremonial Sabbaths that were a 'shadow of things to come' (Col 2:16–17),

¹⁵ Andrews, *History of the Sabbath*, 92.

¹⁶ Frank B. Holbrook, "Should Christians Observe the Israelite Festivals? A Brief Statement of SDA Understanding," *Biblical Research Institute*, July 1987, 5, <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/israelitefestivals.pdf>, emphasis original. A recently published research of contemporaneous ancient Greek papyri and ostraca indicates that "the hand-writing of ordinances" is a sufficiently reliable rendition of the basic underlying Greek phrase "*cheirographon tois dogmasin*." Kyu Seop Kim, "The Meaning of *Χειρόγραφον* in Colossians 2:14 Revisited," *TynBul* 68.2 (2017): 223–39.

¹⁷ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 280.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹⁹ Veloso, "The Law of God," 477.

²⁰ It states: "The ceremonial system was meant to function only as a type, a symbol of a future reality—the coming of Jesus and His death and High Priestly ministry." Clifford R. Goldstein, ed., *Christ and His Law* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2014), 9, https://absg.adventist.org/pdf.php?file=2014:2Q:SE:PDFs:EAQ214_01.pdf

[which were] pointing forward to the ministry and sacrifice of Jesus and then ending with His death on the cross.”²¹ Yet, this oft-repeated interpretation is no longer considered (among some Adventist academics) as a conclusive argument for the identity of the *sabbata* of Col 2:16.

3. Syntax: Linguistic Links to Identify Which “Sabbath”

In a recent scholarly volume dealing with the issue of the Sabbath, Craig L. Blomberg asserted that the seventh-day Sabbath is “what Jews universally meant the overwhelming majority of the time when they used the word *Sabbath* without qualification.”²² Curiously, Blomberg provides no supportive evidence for this claim (which is especially troubling since there is only *one* known case in which the word *sabbath* appears without direct linguistic and/or syntactical qualification²³ (i.e., Acts 1:12; its historical context, nevertheless, does appear to identify it as the weekly Sabbath).²⁴

Meticulous examination of all 180 occurrences of this “sabbath” terminology in the Bible (i.e., *šabbāt* in the Hebrew and either *sabbaton* or *sabbata* in NT Greek)²⁵ reveals that the writing prophets consistently surrounded these terms with definitive, reliable syntactical and linguistic indicators, as

- ²¹ See the study for “Justice and Mercy in the Old Testament: Part 1” in Clifford R. Goldstein, ed., *The Role of Christ in the Community* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2016), 24, https://absg.advenist.org/pdf.php?file=2016:3Q:SE:PDFs:EAQ316_03.pdf
- ²² Craig L. Blomberg, “The Sabbath as Fulfilled in Christ,” in *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views*, ed. Christopher John Donato (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 343 (emphasis original).
- ²³ Syntax is defined as “the way in which linguistic elements (such as words) are put together to form constituents (such as phrases or clauses).” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “syntax,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syntax>.
- ²⁴ In addition, the reference Blomberg cites for this notion similarly furnishes no support either.
- ²⁵ The investigation of the linguistic links related to “sabbath” has been intentionally done only in the Hebrew of the OT and the Greek of the NT, since no translation (including the LXX) seems to provide consistent and reliable renderings. For example, at times the LXX fails to translate *ḥag* at all, as in Lev 23:41 and 1 Kgs 8:2. Also, the LXX is inconsistent in the manner in which it renders the terms *ḥag* and *mô’ēd* when they appear in the same passage. These terms are rendered as *heortē* and *panēguris* respectively in Ezek 46:11; Hos 2:11 (Heb. v. 13), 9:5. However, in 2 Chr 8:13 and Ezek 45:17, both *ḥag* and *mô’ēd* are rendered as *heortē*, with no distinction between the two.

well as contextual factors, so as to enable the reader or hearer to quickly and easily recognize what the term sabbath refers to in each setting.²⁶ For instance, terms such as *the*, *day*, and *keep* are repeatedly employed to cue in the reader and/or hearer when the weekly Sabbath is being addressed in the passage.²⁷ At times, language is used to indicate a direct contrast, such as when God refers to the seventh-day Sabbath as "My Sabbath";²⁸ while he refers to the ritual or ceremonial sabbaths as "her" or "your" [i.e., Israel's] annual and/or septennial "sabbaths."²⁹

In both Hebrew and Greek, approximately 85 percent of the time when the Hebrew *šabbāt* or the Greek *sabbaton/sabbata* appear, they identify the weekly Sabbath, while the rest linguistically and contextually clearly refer to something else, such as annual ceremonial sabbaths or the Sabbatical Years (i.e., every seventh year).³⁰ Intriguingly, the term *sabbata* in Col 2:16

²⁶ This is similar to the word *fast* in English, which could mean "firm," "loyal," "quick," "unfading," etc., depending on the context. Ignoring the Jewish ritual context of Col 2:16, as well as the fact that *sabbaton/sabbata* can mean different things, some have suggested to follow the so-called "plain meaning of the text." However, this "plain meaning" is a misnomer for glibly assuming that the weekly Sabbath is being spoken of here, instead of allowing the text, in its context, to provide the meaning.

²⁷ It is vital to recognize that this type of distinguishing linguistic marker is indispensable *only* because the original Hebrew *šabbāt* and Greek *sabbaton/sabbata* are utilized in Scripture for various appointed seasons and sacred days, as many biblical scholars recognize. Failing to understand that such linguistic markers are restricted in purpose and application, some writers have noted that, in connection with the Hebrew word *mō'ādīm* ("appointed seasons"), God refers to these as both "My appointed seasons" (Lev 23:2 JPS) and "your (i.e., Israel's) appointed seasons" (Num 29:39 JPS). Ignoring the fact that *mō'ādīm*, when used in cultic contexts, has *only* one meaning and thus does *not* need linguistic markers for identification, these writers then claim that the pronouns (*My* and *her*), as used with *šabbāt*, may not be mutually exclusive, thus allegedly casting doubt on the linguistic evidence which distinguishes the weekly Sabbath from ceremonial sabbaths. Such speculative theories, however, are contradicted by the extensive evidence seen in Scripture.

²⁸ Emphasis added. For example, such use of "My Sabbath/s" in Levitical passages, such as Lev 19:3, 30 (which has the immediate context of the decalogue, thus indicating the weekly Sabbath), has been corroborated by doctoral research. See Mathilde Frey, "The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: An Exegetical and Theological Study" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2011), 47, 189, 192, 238–54.

²⁹ See, for example, Lev 23:32, 26:35; Hos 2:11. For further analysis, see du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, 20–21.

³⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of these 180 appearances of sabbath terms in Scripture, see *ibid.*, 20–21, 39, 155–68. It is to be noted that, both in *Judging the Sabbath: Discovering What Can't Be Found in Colossians 2:16* and this essay, the research is based on an

4. The *Sabbata*: Its Connection with the Definite Article

Bible translations do not reveal to the reader of English versions of the NT that the word sabbath is actually derived from two different words (*sabbaton* and *sabbata*),³² as morphological studies attest.³³ Analysis shows that the lexical form *sabbaton* is used about forty times to refer to the weekly Sabbath; yet, it includes a definite article for only about half of these occurrences.³⁴ However, an intriguing factor emerges when the language usage

Then, Milgrom states that the fact that "the order of these words is reversed in v. 4," as compared with v. 37, literally locks in vv. 4–37 as "a chiasmically related inclusion." Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3B (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 2033. Milgrom is thus correct in his conclusion that "the close of the original calendar [in vs. 37] ... forms a chiasmically structured inclusio with the opening verse, v. 4." Ibid. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch concur, noting that the concluding formula (of vv. 37 and 38) "answers to the heading in vers. [sic] 4, in which the Sabbaths are excepted [i.e., excluded]." C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, vol. 2 of *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 447. W. H. Bellinger Jr. also says that "verse 38 notes that these festival observances are in addition to the customary Sabbath worship." W. H. Bellinger Jr., *Leviticus and Numbers*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 140. The above verbal indicators and chiastic structure together with the etymological meaning of the term *mô'ēd* (as an event determined by the human citing of the new moon) provide sufficient evidence to support the deduction by Herbert E. Douglass that "verse 3 is thrown in parenthetically between verse 2 and verses 4–37." Herbert E. Douglass, *Feast Days: Shadows of Our Faith* (Roseville, CA: Amazing Facts, 2006), 40. This thus confirms, as Milgrom repeatedly has noted, that "the sabbath is not a *mô'ēd*," Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 1956, 2034; see also 1953–54.

- ³² The focus of this essay (and more especially this subsection) is the manner in which *sabbata* is employed in NT Greek. While *sabbata* is found in the Greek translations of the OT (such as the LXX), that is not the concern here, especially since there is sufficient evidence that translators, such as those of the LXX, were not always accurate and consistent in their renditions. For examples of this, see du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, 52n3, 53n10, 68n17, 80n26.
- ³³ See Lucille Harper-Knapp, "A Critical Study of the Greek Words *Sabbaton* and *Sabbata*" (MA thesis, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1949), 2; Eduard Lohse, "Sabbaton," *TDNT*, 989; see BDAG, s.v. "σάββατον"; *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised*, s.v. "σάββατον"; du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, 32–33.
- ³⁴ See Matt 12:2, 5, 8; 24:20; Mark 2:27 [2x], 28; 6:2; 15:42 (i.e., *prosabbaton*); 16:1; Luke 6:1, 5, 6, 7; 13:14 [2x], 15, 16; 14:1, 3, 5; 23:54, 56; John 5:9, 10, 16, 18; 7:22, 23 [2x]; 9:14, 16; 19:31 [2x]; Acts 1:12; 13:27, 42, 44; 15:21; 18:4 (as well as Luke 6:9, NA). With a definite article, see Matt 12:5, 8; Mark 2:27 [2x], 28; 15:42 (i.e., *prosabbaton*); 16:1; Luke 6:5, 7, 9; 13:14 [2x], 15, 16; 14:3, 5; 23:56; John 5:18, 9:16, 19:31 [2x].

of *koinē* Greek is examined relative to the form *sabbata*, as employed to refer to the seventh-day Sabbath.³⁵ First, the eighteen appearances of the lexical term *sabbata*, other than the one located in Col 2:16, is examined.³⁶

Of these eighteen occurrences of the word *sabbata*, the Synoptic Gospels employ it for a total of thirteen times as *tois sabbasin*;³⁷ furthermore, in his writings, Luke uses it three times as *tōn sabbatōn*.³⁸ Significantly, in all sixteen occasions in which *sabbata* irrefutably refers to the weekly Sabbath, *sabbata* is immediately preceded by a definite article. In Acts 17:2, the phrase *sabbata tria* appears (i.e., “three Sabbaths”);³⁹ hence, it is grammatically inappropriate to include the definite article before it, even though it too refers to weekly Sabbaths. Matthew 28:1 begins: *Opse de sabbatōn tē epiphōskousē eis mian sabbatōn* (literally: “Now after Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward first of week”). Since the immediate context identifies the lexical *sabbata* as the day that immediately precedes the “first [day] of [the] week” (i.e., the weekly Sabbath), it is completely unnecessary to include a definite article in this case. In brief, whenever the lexical form *sabbata* is employed to incontrovertibly refer to the seventh-day Sabbath, it is always preceded by a definite article, except when the immediate context makes it either inappropriate (as in Acts 17:2) or unnecessary (as in Matt 28:1).⁴⁰

Interestingly, the lexical form utilized in Col 2:16 is *sabbata*. If the *sabbata* here were intended to refer to the weekly Sabbath, then the reader would

³⁵ See Matt 12:1, 5, 10, 11, 12; 28:1; Mark 1:21; 2:23, 24; 3:2, 4; Luke 4:16, 31; 6:2; 13:10; Acts 13:14, 16:13, 17:2 (as well as Luke 6:9, TR). In addition, six times *sabbata* is rendered “week” based on the context and linguistic markers. See Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7. In each of these passages there is a numeral directly related to the term *sabbata* which, together with the context, shows that the English word *week* is being identified.

³⁶ Those interested in additional information, especially regarding how context and linguistic links reveal when and why *sabbaton* is rendered as the seventh-day Sabbath or as the week or when and why *sabbata* is rendered as the seventh-day Sabbath or as the week, see du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, 31–45, 163–68.

³⁷ Matthew 12:1, 5, 10, 11, 12; Mark 1:21; 2:23, 24; 3:2, 4; Luke 4:31, 6:2 (TR has 6:9 as *tois sabbasin*), 13:10.

³⁸ Luke 4:16; Acts 13:14, 16:13.

³⁹ That this is evidently a reference to weekly, seventh-day Sabbaths is clear from the point made that Paul went to “a synagogue of the Jews” (Acts 17:1), “as his custom was,” and “reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (v. 2).

⁴⁰ This essentially consistent connection of the definite article with *sabbata* appears as a distinct contrast to the manner that the term *sabbaton* is employed in the NT to refer to the weekly Sabbath. Of its forty-one usages, a definite article is directly connected to it only twenty times (Matt 12:5, 8; Mark 2:7 [2x], 28; 16:1; Luke 6:5, 7, 9; 13:14 [2x], 15, 16; 14:3, 5; 23:56; John 5:18, 9:16, 19:31 [2x]).

expect there to be an attached definite article or some other explicit grammatical and/or contextual information (as noted above), as is the consistent pattern throughout the entire NT. There is, however, no definite article linked to *sabbata* here. Hence, this contradistinctive usage of *sabbata* appears to be an evidence of an internal grammatical indicator that, in this specific case in Col 2:16, the *sabbata* is intended to refer to something other than the seventh-day Sabbath; that is, it points to ceremonial sabbaths.

5. The Semantics: New Testament Meaning of Key Terms

A frequently repeated challenge regarding the *sabbata* of Col 2:16 relates to the alleged logic of the language used in this passage, that is, "feast [*heortē*], new moon, sabbath."⁴¹ For example, using the language of the KJV, C. E. Putnam claimed that "these 'holydays' [Greek: *heortē* (sing.)] included all the feast-sabbaths. So, are we not forced to recognize that 'the sabbath' here mentioned is the fourth commandment Sabbath?"⁴² In substantial agreement with the supposition that the lexical term *heortē* includes all ceremonial sabbaths, former Adventist pastor Greg Taylor (together with his wife Paula Taylor) alleged that "it would be redundant" for Paul to use the term *sabbata* for annual ritual days, for then "it would read 'Let no one judge you regarding festivals, new moons, or festivals.' That would not make sense."⁴³

Extensive analysis of all the occurrences of the Greek term *heortē* in the NT, outside of its appearance in Col 2:16, reveals the following based on immediate and broader contextual factors: sixteen times it refers to the

⁴¹ Incidentally, one of the most popular resources used by many English-speaking people (especially laity) is *Strong's Concordance*. The Greek dictionary section simply defines *sabbaton* as "the Sabbath (i.e. *Shabbath*), or day of weekly repose ... by extens[ion] a week." *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, s.v. "sabbaton." No mention is made of the fact that the underlying Greek term can refer to more than only the seventh-day Sabbath or the week. Such is the danger of using inadequate research tools.

⁴² C. E. Putnam, *Sunday Observance, or Sinai Seventh-Day Sabbath-Keeping* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1924), 25. Similarly, Samuele Bacchiocchi postulated that "ceremonial sabbaths ... are already included in the word *heortēs*—festival." Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 360.

⁴³ Greg Taylor and Paula Taylor, "An Open Letter to Our Friends and Family," in *Former Adventist Fellowship*, rev. 1 August 2007, <http://www.formeradventist.com/stories/gregtaylorappend.html>.

Passover,⁴⁴ seven times it indicates the Feast of Tabernacles,⁴⁵ and once it seems to identify Pentecost.⁴⁶ In other words, throughout all the NT examples examined, the word *heortē* is used consistently to refer to what is technically termed “pilgrim festivals,” in which circumcised Israelites were required to attend the celebrations in Jerusalem. This limited meaning of *heortē* is a faithful rendition of its Hebrew complement, *ḥag*.

OT scholar Richard M. Davidson notes:

God commanded Israel, “Three times in the year you shall keep a feast unto me” (Exod 23:14). These are identified as the Feast of Unleavened Bread (connected with Passover), the Feast of Harvest (Pentecost), and the Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles), in verses 14–16. These are the *only* times of assembly in the cultic calendar actually called “feasts” (*ḥag*) in Scripture.⁴⁷

Just as the Hebrew *ḥag* is restricted, so is its NT Greek counterpart, *heortē*. Hence, Henry Cowles was accurate in identifying *heortē* as “referring to the three great annual festivals.”⁴⁸ Significantly, throughout the NT, the Day of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Sabbatical Years are never referred to as *heortē*. Interestingly, in OT Hebrew all three occasions are referred to using some form of the noun *šabbāt*.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Matt 26:5, 27:15; Mark 14:2, 15:6; Luke 2:41, 42; 22:1 (this text literally states: “the feast [*heortē*] of Unleavened Bread” “which is called Passover”; TR has *heortē* in 23:17); John 2:23; 4:45 [2x]; 6:4; 11:56; 12:12, 20; 13:1, 29 (TR has *heortē* in Acts 18:21). As a verb, *heortazō* (“to celebrate a festival”) appears once in the NT, in an obvious metaphorical reference to Passover/Unleavened Bread (1 Cor 5:8).

⁴⁵ John 7:2, 8 [2x], 10, 11, 14, 37.

⁴⁶ John 5:1. The explanatory note in the NET indicates that, in view of the fact that people were outside near the pool, this would not be the Passover, a winters-end feast. Also, the following feast (in John 7:2) is identified as Tabernacles; thus, the one in John 5:1 is most likely Pentecost, though this cannot be known with total certainty.

⁴⁷ Richard M. Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” in *Symposium on Revelation: Introductory and Exegetical Studies; Book 1*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 6 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 120 (emphasis added).

⁴⁸ Henry Cowles, *The Shorter Epistles; viz: Of Paul to the Galatians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; Thessalonians; Timothy; Titus and Philemon; also, of James, Peter, and Jude* (New York: Appleton, 1879), 173.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Lev 23:24, 32. This is even true of Sabbatical Years. See Lev 25:2–6; etc. For more on this, see du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, 17–26, 47–53.

Essentially corroborating the meticulous investigation of *heortē*, *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary: Delta-Epsilon* indicates that "the Septuagint [LXX] employs *heortē* to translate *chagh* [*hag*],"⁵⁰ and that "the New Testament carries over the Septuagint's use of *heortē*."⁵¹ As John Eadie concluded in his commentary, *heortē* in Col 2:16 refers specifically "to the three great feasts of the Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles."⁵² Once the true definition of the crucial terms in Colossians is accurately understood, it becomes obvious that there is no redundancy in the language. The correct logic of the language demonstrates that Paul mentioned *heortē* (so as to identify the three pilgrim festivals), and then he mentioned the new moons (about which there is essentially universal scholarly consensus).⁵³ However, if the apostle wanted to identify the non-pilgrimage appointed seasons of ancient Israel, he had to employ the distinct term *sabbata* in Col 2:16, a term that includes the annual sabbath-related rests of Trumpets and Atonement, and by extension the Sabbatical Years.⁵⁴

6. The Structure: Chiastic Form of Three Crucial Terms

Postulating that "Paul evidently had the same order in mind,"⁵⁵ various writers have made the following basic claim: "'A feast day, or a new moon, or a Sabbath day' (R.V.). Note the order – yearly, monthly, weekly";⁵⁶ thus, implying that the *sabbata* here refers to the seventh-day Sabbath. Then, they have listed several OT passages as supposed evidence of this alleged trilogy. Admittedly, if one simply superficially skims over various passages,

⁵⁰ *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary: Delta-Epsilon*, s.v. "ἑορτή."

⁵¹ *Ibid.* However, it must be noted that the LXX is not always consistent and/or precise in its use of *heortē*.

⁵² John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, Classic Commentary Library (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 176.

⁵³ Just as the Hebrew term *hōdeš* ("new moon") is uncontested, so is its Greek equivalent *neomēnia*. See du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, 107–109, 130.

⁵⁴ See, for example, du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, 47–53, 77. Since the Hebrew term *šabbāt* was also used to refer to the Sabbatical Years and since the LXX uses the Greek word *sabbata* to translate it, this part of ancient Israel's cultic system is apparently also included in the collective singular *sabbata* of Col 2:16.

⁵⁵ Maurice Logan, *Sabbath Theology: A Reply to Those Who Insist That Saturday Is the Only True Sabbath Day* (New York: New York Sabbath Committee, 1913), 268.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

such as 1 Chr 23:29–31; 2 Chr 2:4; 8:12, 13; 31:3; and Neh 10:33⁵⁷ (in most English versions), one may easily and prematurely surmise that these passages include a “triad” similar to that seen in Col 2:16. However, intensive and extensive analyses of the original languages militate quite persuasively against the supposition that Paul was quoting from these ostensibly similar texts.⁵⁸

An examination of a more careful English translation, such as that done by the Jewish Publication Society, reveals an emphasis on “the *morning and evening* burnt-offerings, and the burnt-offerings for the *sabbaths*, and for the *new moons*, and for the *appointed seasons*” (2 Chr 31:3, emphases added). In other words, all of the five passages referenced above list at least four parts (not three as in Col 2:16); all five include (explicitly or implicitly) a daily ritual (a factor not present in Col 2:16); all five have a decreasing frequency order—daily, weekly, monthly, yearly—not the reverse (as alleged in Col 2:16); and all five directly deal with burnt sacrifices offered (something not seen in Col 2:16). In view of the above, a different approach, to this supposed “triad,” seems imperative.

Before proceeding further, it may be instructive to review the matter of the relevance of literary structure for exegetical analysis and theological understanding. Many scholarly studies have focused on what is more commonly known as parallelism. As John T. Willis stated: “Much attention has been given to synonymous, ‘pivot-pattern,’ ‘Janus,’ ABCB, and chiasmic parallelism in particular.”⁵⁹ A broad definition of parallelism, which is recognized as the “overall tendency in Scripture,”⁶⁰ is that “it occurs in the interaction of semantic and grammatical equivalence and opposition”⁶¹ with “a sense of balance between or among the elements.”⁶²

⁵⁷ Internal evidence reveals that all the passages referenced in 1 and 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah refer back to Num 28–29, where instructions were first systematically articulated by God to Moses. See du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, 61–62.

⁵⁸ See, for example, the chapter “The Calendar Sequence” in du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, 55–70. This chapter also addresses the alleged similarity of Ezek 45:13–17 and 46:1–15 to Col 2:16.

⁵⁹ John T. Willis, “Alternating (ABA'B') Parallelism in the Old Testament Psalms and Prophetic Literature,” in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Elaine R. Follis, JSOTSup 40 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 49.

⁶⁰ Robert A. Harris, *Discerning Parallelism: A Study in Northern French Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis*, BJS 341 (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004), 108.

⁶¹ David L. Petersen and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 35.

⁶² Patrick D. Miller Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 30.

In the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, seminary professor Kenneth A. Strand demonstrates how, in Gen 2:1–3, Moses recorded the account of God's institution of the seventh-day Sabbath in "the form of a chiasm or inverted parallel statement."⁶³ Intriguingly, when it comes to Col 2:16, the final mention of the word sabbath in Scripture, Strand made a similar suggestion: "It is also possible that Paul was using the common literary device of inverted parallelism [or chiasm], thus moving from annual to monthly and then back again to annual festivals."⁶⁴ About a decade before Strand's supposition that the tripartite phrase ("feast, new moon, sabbath") may be a chiastic structure, Gregory T. Christopher noted, in an analysis of this part of Colossians, that "NT studies have begun to recognize their presence and potential for interpretation."⁶⁵ As Jo Ann Davidson affirmed: "Both the Old and the New Testaments in Scripture harbor numerous parallel and chiastic structures.... New Testament writers, as ethnic Hebrews, also utilized these characteristic patterns even though writing in Greek."⁶⁶

Various biblical scholars have provided evidence of chiastic structures in this epistle,⁶⁷ including one which spans Col 2:6–19, which "enriches our understanding of the movement of Paul's thought:"⁶⁸

Introduction [2:6] "As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him"

A [2:7] "**Rooted and built up** in Him and established in the faith"

B [2:8] "Beware lest anyone cheat you ... not according to **Christ**"

C [2:9] "In Him dwells ... the Godhead **bodily**"; 10a "You are complete in Him"

D [2:10b] "Who is the head of all **principality and power**"

E [2:11] "Circumcised with the circumcision made without **hands**"

F [2:12] "**Buried** with Him in baptism, in which you also were **raised**"

⁶³ Kenneth A. Strand, "The Sabbath," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 494.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 506. Strand does opine, however, that "Colossians 2 seems comparable to the repeated OT references to a trilogy in the pattern of annual-monthly-weekly observances," a matter addressed in the main body of this essay (*Ibid.*, emphasis added).

⁶⁵ Gregory T. Christopher, "A Discourse Analysis of Colossians 2:16–3:17," *Grace Theological Journal* 11.2 (1990): 211.

⁶⁶ Jo Ann Davidson, *Toward a Theology of Beauty: A Biblical Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 39.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 115; Ekkehardt Mueller, "The Firstborn (Col 1:15)," *Reflections: A BRI Newsletter* 12 (2005): 7.

⁶⁸ Ian H. Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, JSNTSup 111 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 152.

F' [2:13] "Dead in your transgressions ... He made you alive together with Him"⁶⁹

E' [2:14] "Wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us"

D' [2:15] "Having disarmed principalities and powers"

C' [2:16] "Let no one pass judgment"; 17 "But the **body** is Christ's"⁷⁰

B' [2:18] "Let no one cheat you"; 19a "Not holding fast to the **Head**"

A' [2:19b] "Nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows"

In addition to inverted parallelisms which cover large literary units, more simple conceptual chiasms can be found in Scripture, such as seen in the crucial three terms in Col 2:16: "feast, new moon, sabbath." As noted above, the NT Greek term for feast (*heortē*) is a restricted word, "referring to the three great annual festivals"⁷¹ (Passover/Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). *Sabbata*, meanwhile, can include the other non-pilgrimage annual observances of Trumpets, Atonement, and by extension Sabbatical Years. Incidentally, in July 2016, the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* appropriately identified "sabbatical years" as being "among the ceremonial Sabbaths that were a 'shadow of things to come' (Col. 2:16–17) [which were] pointing forward to the ministry and sacrifice of Jesus."⁷² Hence, since the "new moons" are well-recognized as the rituals that took place at the start of each lunar month, it would be legitimate, following Strand's suggestion above, to diagram the collective singular nouns as follows:⁷³

A "festival/s" = three *annual* pilgrimage feasts

B "new moon/s" = regular lunar *monthly* celebrations

A' "sabbath/s" = two *annual* and one septennial rest

In short, these "sabbaths," which conceptually echo the "festivals," appear to be the ritual rest days that formed such an integral part of the ceremonial system of the ancient Hebrew religion.

⁶⁹ This is from the NASB.

⁷⁰ This is from the ASV.

⁷¹ Cowles, *The Shorter Epistles*, 173.

⁷² See the study for "Justice and Mercy in the Old Testament: Part 1," in Goldstein, *The Role of Christ*, 24.

⁷³ NT exegete Murray J. Harris observed that the first two nouns in Col 2:16 (*heortē* and *neomēnia*) may be generic singulars which are translated as plurals. Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 118.

7. The Schedule: Calculation of Appointed Seasons by the New Moon

William H. Shea's research on chiasmic structures shows that the "literary form of a given portion of inspired Scripture was designed to help explain its meaning."⁷⁴ In single peak chiasms (as in Col 2:16), whatever was intentionally placed at the literary center can be recognized as pivotal in the overall chiasmic structure.⁷⁵ When we observe that the key elements in Col 2:16 are indeed "moving from annual to monthly and then back again to annual festivals,"⁷⁶ the natural question is: What importance is there to "new moons" being the fulcrum in this chiasm? In addition to the special burnt offerings (Num 28:11) and blowing of trumpets (Num 10:10, Ps 81:3), why was this first day of each lunar month of such great import?

Merrill F. Unger aptly noted: "As the festivals, according to the Mosaic law, were always to be celebrated on the same day of the month, it was necessary to fix the commencement of the month. This was determined by the appearance of the new moon."⁷⁷ As William D. Mounce specified: "The month begins at the appearance of the new moon, the thin crescent visible at sunset."⁷⁸ In relation to Israel's religious year, the new moon played "an especially decisive role,"⁷⁹ for the "moon governed the dates for [all of the] other religious festivals."⁸⁰ Hence, its central position in this simple semantic chiasm.

This fulcrum position of the new moon in this chiasmic structure, by means of which the other religious occasions were calculated, has additional implications for the term *sabbata*. There is no dispute that the "feasts" as located in part A of the chiasm are determined by the new moon. Because A' serves as an augmented echo of A, it indicates that the *sabbata* are also to

⁷⁴ William H. Shea, "Literary Form and Theological Function in Leviticus," in *The Seventy Weeks, Leviticus, and the Nature of Prophecy*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 3 (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 131. The quoted statement is part of the "editorial synopsis" of Shea's article.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Strand, "The Sabbath," 506.

⁷⁷ Merrill F. Unger, "Festivals," *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 409.

⁷⁸ Mounce's *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, s.v. "month."

⁷⁹ K. Koch, "mô'ēd," *TDOT* 8:170.

⁸⁰ *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "moon."

be calculated by means of the new moon. According to Scripture, the seventh-day Sabbath was never determined by any lunar computation. Thus, the central position of the new moon serves to corroborate the notion that the *sabbata* in this Col 2:16 chiasm can refer to only ceremonial sabbaths, as they were either directly or indirectly based on lunar calculations.

8. The Singular: Importance of Inter-Textual Associations

Significantly, there is one specific passage in the OT which may function as an inter-textual link: Hos 2:11. Young's Literal Translation renders the key phrase in this text as "her festival, her new moon, and her sabbath." Note the following areas of concord between the tripartite phrase in Col 2 and that of Hos 2: Both consist of a three-part grouping; both have the same sequence (first "feast," then "new moon," finally "sabbath"); both have the key terms stated as generic/collective singulars;⁸¹ both passages deal with the *days* per se, and not with any burnt sacrifices; and both lack the linguistic links crucial for identifying "sabbath" as the seventh day, if such were the case. In addition, both passages have a negative context of the misuse of these sacred times, and both speak of their actual termination.⁸²

⁸¹ Some allege that the final term, *sabbatōn*, of the calendric string in Col 2:16 is not ambiguous but that it is a genitive plural and cannot be singular. However, rigorous research of the LXX, the Modern Greek Bible, extra-biblical works (such as Zenon, Philo, Josephus, etc.), and Deutero-canonical writings reveals that the lexical term *sabbata* was regularly used as a singular Greek word completely interchangeably with the normal singular word *sabbaton*. The only time that *sabbata* is rightly understood to be a plural is when it is directly followed by a numeral as in Acts 17:2. Hence, as various scholars have correctly concluded, the lexical term *sabbata* (in Col 2:16) should be understood as a generic or collective singular. Since all three terms in Col 2:16 are thus seen as generic/collective singulars, this strengthens the connection with the three key terms in Hos 2:11, which are also collective singulars. See Robert Alter who states, "All these nouns are singular in the Hebrew but with a collective sense." Robert Alter, *Prophets: Nevi'im*, vol. 2 of *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2019), 1209. For extensive evidence regarding the usage and meaning of *sabbata*, see Ron du Preez, "Σάββατα in Colossians 2:16: Singular or Plural?" in *Meeting with God on the Mountains: Essays in Honor of Richard M. Davidson*, ed. Jiří Moskala (Berrien Springs, MI: Old Testament Department, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2016), 421–64.

⁸² See du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, 135–37 for more data. Some have wondered about the meaning of *en merei* in v. 16. Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich note that in Col 2:16 it means "with regard to a festival." BAGD, s.v. "μέρος."

Additional linguistic analysis shows that the term *feast* or *festival* in Hos 2:11 is actually the rather restricted Hebrew term *ḥag*. As already noted, in connection with Israel's ceremonial law, this word always refers to one or more of the *pilgrim* festivals—Passover (including Unleavened Bread), Pentecost, and/or Tabernacles. Next comes the new moon (*ḥōdeš*), which played such a vital role in determining dates for the other appointed seasons, as stated above. Finally, the phrase "her sabbath" (*šabbātāh*) identifies this as Israel's ceremonial sabbath(s), rather than the weekly Sabbath, which is never spoken of in this manner⁸³ but which the Lord refers to as "My Sabbath(s)."

In short, the lexicographical data, the linguistic links, and the context together persuasively indicate the similarity of the *pilgrim feast*, *new moon*, *ceremonial sabbath* sequence recorded in both Hosea and Colossians.⁸⁴ Commentator Eduard Schweizer rightly notes that in Col 2:16, "the sequence

⁸³ Some have suggested that because God was addressing Israel as an unfaithful wife (in Hos 2:11), the phrase "her sabbath" was used. However, such a conclusion ignores the chiasmic structure of the terms (an ABA' pattern in which the annual pilgrim festival [*ḥag*] is echoed by the annual ritual sabbath [*šabbāt*]). Also, it ignores the central position of "new moon" [*ḥōdeš*], thus indicating that the focus was the ceremonial regulations and not the Sabbath of the Decalogue. Moreover, such thinking fails to take into account the actual meaning and use of the Hebrew terms *ḥag* (which is limited to the annual *pilgrim festivals*) and *šabbāt* (which can include Trumpets, Atonement, and by extension Sabbatical Years). Furthermore, the context indicates that Hosea was writing to a people who had convoluted God's instructions; they had turned the solemn times of these annual sabbaths into levity, which was one reason they were being reproved. Intriguingly, in a somewhat similar case of the rebellion of Israel, despite their rejection of him and his laws, God still spoke of the weekly rest day as "My Sabbaths" (see Ezek 20:8–24, 22:26, 23:38, etc.). In brief, despite the rebellion of his people, God still calls the seventh day "My Sabbath" and not "her Sabbath."

⁸⁴ While the above may seem quite technical to us, a knowledgeable Jewish Christian or gentile convert would have quickly recognized that Paul's statement in Col 2:16 could have reference solely to Hos 2:11, for only in that text were these three specific terms expressed similarly in the (generic/collective) singular, in the same sequence, and using the same appropriate lexical terms (in Hebrew and Greek): pilgrim festival, new moon, sabbath. Furthermore, in light of Col 2:17, "which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (NKJV), these early Christian believers would have thought of nothing other than the ceremonial sabbaths that were all symbols and types of Christ who had indeed come by the time the epistle was written to the Colossians. For example, if one were to speak of "center, guard, tackle" in reference to an unspecified sporting event, people familiar with American sports would think of "American football" and not some other sport. Similarly, if one were to speak of *heortē*, *neomēnia*, *sabbata* to Jewish Christians or gentile converts, they would naturally think of the "cultic times" of pilgrim festivals (i.e., Passover/Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, Tabernacles), new moon celebrations, and ceremonial sabbaths (i.e., Trumpets,

festival—new moon—sabbath corresponds precisely to that of the Greek Bible (Hos 2:13 [LXX]).⁸⁵

9. The Salvation: Through Jesus Christ, not Ceremonial Days

The major theological thrust of this short epistle is a correct view of Christ, “the visible manifestation of the invisible God” (Col 1:15),⁸⁶ a Christology intimately related to salvation (Col 1:13, 14; cf. 2:11–15) and redemption, with profound implications for ethical living (Col 3:4–4:6). As Sigve K. Tonstad cogently articulated, “It is on the platform of Christ’s role as Creator [1:15] that Paul built the case for Christ’s work as redeemer [1:18].”⁸⁷ The single great message of Colossians may thus be summed up in the declaration: “Christ is all and in all” (Col 3:11b).⁸⁸ Astutely, Charles H. Talbert noted that “it is against the background of this salvific narrative that the arguments of the Colossian letter unfold.”⁸⁹

Immediately after laying down a christological foundation, and moving into the main body of the letter (Col 2:6, 7), Paul begins with the imperative *blepete* (“beware,” v. 8), thus drawing attention to what Christ has already done for any who belong to him.⁹⁰ Paul then links this section (vv. 8–15) with the word *therefore* (v. 16), so as to challenge the false teachings arising

Atonement, Sabbatical Years). By letting the inspired writers of Scripture speak for themselves, it becomes clear that, at the very least, Col 2:16 shows that the ceremonial sabbaths were abrogated, not the weekly Sabbath found in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2–17).

⁸⁵ Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. Andrews Chester (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 155. A lower case “s” has been used for the “sabbath” here, in place of Schweizer’s “S.”

⁸⁶ H. Dermot McDonald, *Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word, 1980), 14.

⁸⁷ Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 269.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 15. See also H. Wayne House, “The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians,” *BSac* 149 (1992): 180–82.

⁸⁹ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 181.

⁹⁰ David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 149.

at Colossae.⁹¹ Not to be missed, however, is the fact that "verses 12 and 13 are central to the appeal of the letter"⁹² and evidently "contain the argument of the entire epistle."⁹³ Emphasizing the sufficiency of salvation in Jesus Christ, Paul states this truth in a typical Hebrew poetic parallelism:

2:12 "Buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised"

2:13 "Dead in your transgressions ... He made you alive together with Him"⁹⁴

As Jerry L. Sumney summarized so succinctly: "The forgiveness and new life that believers receive at baptism has its basis in the cross."⁹⁵ Colossians 2:14 then refers literally to "the handwriting in ordinances" (Darby Bible), which was abolished at the cross. This text, though debated, is recognized as "one of the most vivid descriptions in the New Testament of what happened when Jesus died."⁹⁶ In his 2010 scholarly analysis of the letter to the Colossians, John Paul Heil opined that "the metaphor is convoluted, but presumably reflects again the idea of Christ's death as a sin offering."⁹⁷ This, in turn, reminds the reader of the ritual system as fully elaborated to ancient Israel in Scripture (a system in which forgiveness of sins

⁹¹ See, for example, Curtis Vaughan, *Colossians and Philemon*, Bible Study Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 81; N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 118. Some commentaries see only v. 15 as the focus of the "therefore." Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, SP 17 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 110; McDonald, *Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*, 88; Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 89. Others see only v. 14 as the focus. Francis D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1978–1980), 7:205; T. K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, ICC (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1897), 263; J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Revised Text with Introductions, Notes, and Dissertations*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1884), 192.

⁹² Bonnie B. Thurston, *Reading Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 44.

⁹³ Petr Pokorný, *Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 126.

⁹⁴ Verse 13 is from the NASB.

⁹⁵ Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 146. Admittedly, Sumney proceeds to allege that the *cheirographon* refers to the "record of sin," a matter dealt with separately.

⁹⁶ John Woodhouse, *Colossians and Philemon: So Walk in Him* (Ross-Shire, England: Christian Focus, 2011), 140.

⁹⁷ John Paul Heil, *Colossians: Encouragement to Walk in All Wisdom as Holy Ones in Christ*, ECL 4 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 119n43.

took place through the death of sacrificial animals, especially the lamb),⁹⁸ which once again calls for a focus on Jesus Christ.⁹⁹ Verse 15 then reveals, as H. Dermot McDonald aptly notes: “Christ the crucified is Lord; and all the hostile powers of the universe have become subjected to him. In Christ’s cross the demonic hosts of evil have met their Conqueror.”¹⁰⁰

All of the above serves as a precursor to v. 16, which begins with “therefore” — as a reminder that believers in Christ must not allow anything (including the soon-to-be-mentioned ritual days) to be introduced as supposedly essential activities for salvation — for these ritual “feasts, new moons, and sabbaths” pointed to Christ and have met their fulfillment in his life and death.

10. The Sacrifices: Culmination Portends End of Ritual Days

In recent times, a novel interpretation has emerged among some Adventist academics, in connection with the Greek phrase *en merei* located in Col 2:16: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard [*en merei*] to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath” (RSV). Instead of the usual manner of rendering *en merei* as above or “with respect,” it is now translated as “in a part of,” thus implying that Paul was

⁹⁸ In brief, as *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* concludes: “At the death of Christ the jurisdiction and the function of the ceremonial law came to an end. His atoning sacrifice provided forgiveness for all sins. This act ‘wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross’ (Col 2:14; cf. Deut 31:26; *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 280. The inclusion of “Deut 31:26” above is considered by some to be incorrect “proof-texting.” Perhaps, the Greek term *graphōn* (in the LXX), of Deut 31:24, does provide a linguistic link between the Deut 31:26 text and the *cheirographon* which is “against us” or “concerning us.”

⁹⁹ E. White notes that “it is this [ritual] law that Christ ‘took ... out of the way, nailing it to His cross.’ Colossians 2:14.” E. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 365.

¹⁰⁰ McDonald, *Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*, 87. N. T. Wright succinctly summarizes v. 15: “Paul is asserting that, because of what Jesus did on the cross, the powers and authorities, are a beaten, defeated lot, so that (by implication) neither the Colossians nor anyone else who belongs to Jesus need be overawed by them again.” Wright, *The Epistles of Paul*, 114.

purportedly pointing to solely the sacrifices of the festal calendar but not to the actual days themselves.¹⁰¹

This notion, however, stands in direct tension with the primary purpose and function of the appointed seasons, especially as specifically articulated in the text itself.¹⁰² In reference to the purpose clause located in the pivotal passage of Lev 23:37,¹⁰³ H. Ross Cole's doctoral research demonstrates that "the observance of the holy times thus depends upon the operation of the sacrificial system,"¹⁰⁴ all of which culminated with the death of Christ.¹⁰⁵ In brief, since the biblical passages dealing with the appointed seasons and

¹⁰¹ See Roy E. Gane, "Sabbath and the New Covenant," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10 (1999): 321–22; Paul Giem, "Sabbatōn in Col 2:16," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19 (1981): 195–210.

¹⁰² In their textbook of biblical Hebrew syntax, Bruce Waltke and M. O'Connor make the following point regarding the meaning of clauses that have "the combination of [the preposition] *l* + infinitive construct" as is the case here in Lev 23:37: "Infinitive clauses with *ל* ['l'] are of various types. Some of these types are analogous to those formed with other prepositions, that is *purpose*, *result*, and *temporal* clauses." Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 605–6. As Gesenius puts it, "The original meaning of the [*l*ē] is most plainly seen in those infinitives with [*l*ē] which expressly state a purpose." Emil Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, trans. Arthur E. Crowley, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 348. For example, 1 Kgs 4:34b states: "lišmōa' 'ēl hoḵmat šēlōmōh." This is rightly rendered by the Hebrew linguists Waltke and O'Connor, as the purpose clause: "in order to listen to the wisdom of Solomon." Waltke and O'Connor, *Hebrew Syntax*, 606 (emphasis original). Concurring with this understanding of the Hebrew language, Rodríguez makes the following point in relation to the purpose clause of Lev 23:37: "Each of the festivals was characterized by the joy of bringing offerings and sacrifices to the Lord." Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, "Reinventing Ancient Rituals?" *Biblical Research Institute*, 10 February 2010, <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/theology-festivals/reinventing-ancient-rituals>. Hence, one cannot legitimately separate the offerings from the festal calendar, on the basis of what the Greek phrase *en merēi* could mean.

¹⁰³ The Jerusalem Bible (of Lev 23:37) captures the essence of this purpose clause thus: "These are the solemn festivals of Yahweh to which you are to summon the children of Israel, sacred assemblies for the purpose of offering burnt offerings" (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁴ Cole, "The Sacred Times," 95.

¹⁰⁵ Admittedly, as the timeline of the early church demonstrates, it took them almost two decades (at the Jerusalem Council of AD 49) before they recognized that circumcision was no longer needed to enter into a covenant relationship with God; then, it took several more years (perhaps by around AD 60 by which time Paul had probably penned this Epistle to the Colossians) to come to the realization that the appointed seasons (which they had been observing for about 1,500 years) had lost their primary purpose since they ultimately pointed to the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

the sacrifices reveal an essential and inextricable interdependence between them, the novel and speculative interpretation that Col 2:16 is dealing with only the sacrifices and *not* the festal calendar can, with sufficient reason, be laid aside.

Commenting on the *en merei* used in Col 2, exegete Murray J. Harris identifies it as "a stylistic variation of the previous simple *ἐν [en]*, used to avoid a succession of five datives."¹⁰⁶ This basic position, as rendered unanimously in scores of English Bible versions,¹⁰⁷ is accepted as reliable. Furthermore, in view of the inter-textual data noted above, it seems likely that Paul intentionally interrupted his listing of ritual "food and drink" offerings (e.g., Lev 23:13) to direct attention to the relevant tripartite phrase in Hos 2:11—the OT passage which directly speaks about the termination of the pilgrimage feasts, new moons, and ceremonial sabbaths.

11. Some Concluding Reflections

For more than 130 years, seventh-day Sabbatarians have been confronted with the following basic challenge regarding the interpretation of the lexical term *sabbata* in Col 2:16, as articulated by D. M. Canright: "The word Sabbath occurs sixty times in the New Testament. In fifty-nine times out of the sixty, it is freely admitted by all Sabbatarians that the weekly Sabbath is meant; but in the sixtieth case, where exactly the same word is used both in Greek and English, they say it must mean some other day."¹⁰⁸ In a recent publication on Paul and the law, Kim Papaioannou similarly alleged "that the word *σάββατον* [*sabbaton*] refers almost exclusively ... to the weekly Sabbath. Consistency would suggest, but not require, that the same Sabbath is in view here."¹⁰⁹ To begin with, it should be noted that the above chal-

¹⁰⁶ M. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 185.

¹⁰⁷ See Amplified Bible, ASV, Bible in Basic English, Berkeley Version, CEV, Complete Jewish Bible, Douay-Rheims, ESV, English Version for the Deaf, GNB, God's Word, HCSB, International Children's Bible, JB, KJV, Lamsa, LB, Message, MLB, Moffatt, NAB, NASB, New Century Version, NEB, NET, New International Reader's Version, NIV, NJB, NKJV, NLT, New Life Version, NRSV, New World Translation, Phillips, REB, RSV, RV, Smith-Goodspeed, TEV, Tischendorf, TNIV, Weymouth, Young's Literal Translation, etc.

¹⁰⁸ D. M. Canright, *Seventh-day Adventism Refuted: In a Nutshell* (New York: Revell, 1889, repr., Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1970), 39.

¹⁰⁹ Papaioannou, *Israel, Covenant, Law*, 129. The ellipsis is where the writer stated "(67 of 68 times)." The count of sixty-eight total is due to the omission of *προσάββατον* in Mark 15:42.

lenge has been overstated, since there is an overwhelming weight of evidence (as seen in the consistent trend in multiple English Bible translations over the centuries, as based on textual and contextual factors) that the Greek terms *sabbaton* and *sabbata* have rightly been translated as "week," nine times in the NT,¹¹⁰ in addition to three such occurrences in the LXX.¹¹¹ Furthermore, revealing the fallacy of the argument for the so-called consistency of translation of *sabbata* in Col 2:16, Kenneth H. Wood used a frog as an illustration: "Clearly, to argue that because fifty-nine times the word means a four-legged creature it must mean the same in the statement 'I have a frog in my throat' is nonsense. Meaning must always be decided by context."¹¹²

In brief, careful analysis of the immediate and wider contexts reveals the following regarding the lexical term *sabbata* in this Epistle to the Colossians: first, this is the *only* time in the entire NT where the term *sabbata* is used in a phrase with *heortē* (i.e., "[pilgrim] feast"). Second, it is the *solitary* occasion in the NT where *neomēnia* (i.e., "new moon") appears, and here it is linked to *sabbata*. Third, this is the *exclusive* appearance of the word *sabbata* in any of the "theological" portion of the NT (all the others are in the "historical" parts—the Gospels and Acts). Fourth, this is the *single* instance, after the crucifixion of Jesus, where specific instructions are given to Christians regarding how to relate to the *sabbata*. Fifth, as noted above, this is a lucidly *atypical* usage of *sabbata* (i.e., without any definite article), for throughout the NT Greek the lexeme *sabbata* is consistently preceded by a definite article, whenever it is used on its own (without any other clearly identifying immediate contextual factors), to identify a single seventh-day Sabbath. Sixth, this is a *singular* setting for *sabbata* with language and concepts pointing to the ceremonial system of ancient Israel (see Col 2:14–17). Thus, in view of Blomberg's cogent comment that "this is a unique context,"¹¹³ it seems there are sufficient credible indications that the term *sabbata* in Col 2:16 should *not* be understood as the weekly Sabbath.

¹¹⁰ Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 18:12, 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2.

¹¹¹ Psalms 23:1 (LXX), 47:1 (LXX), 93:1 (LXX). The facts are that "in both biblical languages [of Hebrew and Greek] the [underlying original] words for 'sabbath' are employed *six out of seven times* throughout biblical literature to refer to the *one day out of seven* that is identified as the weekly Sabbath." Du Preez, "Critical Analysis of Σαββάτων," 109. Put another way, almost 15 percent of the time, in both the OT and NT, the original terms (*šabbāt* in Hebrew, and *sabbaton/sabbata* in Greek) refer to something other than the seventh-day Sabbath.

¹¹² Wood, "The 'Sabbath Days'," 339.

¹¹³ Blomberg, "The Sabbath as Fulfilled," 343.

"So let no one judge you ... regarding ... sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the reality is Christ" (Col 2:16–17).¹¹⁴ In a certain sense v. 17, which is remarkably similar to Heb 10:1, becomes the capstone of this essay. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez aptly noted: "The law regulating the Israelite system of worship was a 'shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves' (Heb 10:1), and found its fulfillment in Christ."¹¹⁵ As M. Harris put it:

Food regulations and calendrical observances, and all such legal prescriptions that belonged to the transitory old age, were merely pale adumbrations of a coming permanent reality now realized in the person and gospel of Christ. The implication is that the shadows not only are now superfluous but actually disappear with the appearance of the "substance."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ David W. Pao admits that "the conjunction 'but' (δέ) is a coordinating conjunction, which normally connects two similar clauses. Here, however, it connects the previous relative clause with this independent clause.... The contrast between 'the shadow of the things to come' and 'the substance [that] belongs to Christ' is still the least problematic reading." Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 87. As noted in the NET, "The genitive τοῦ Χριστοῦ (*tu Cristou* [sic]) is appositional and translated as such: 'the reality is Christ.'"

¹¹⁵ Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, *Israelite Festivals and the Christian Church* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 14. Holbrook explained at greater length: "The key to the passage is verse 17, which states that these items are a 'shadow of things to come,' that is, they are *types* which foreshadowed things to come. The law which sets forth a 'shadow of good things to come' is clearly stated ... elsewhere to be the sacrificial, or ritual, law of types and ceremonies (see Hebrews 10:1–4). Therefore, all the items in verse 16 being 'shadows,' or types, are *items found in the ritual law* which typified the coming of Christ, His atoning death, and priestly ministry." Frank B. Holbrook, "Frank Answers: Did Christ Abolish the Sabbath?" *These Times* 86.8 (1977): 22 (emphases original).

¹¹⁶ M. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 106. In basic accord, the official *Adventist Adult Bible Study Guide* stated: "Once He [i.e., Jesus Christ] completed His work on earth, this old system—along with its sacrifices and rituals and feasts—no longer was needed (see Heb 9:9–12)." Goldstein, *Christ and His Law*, 9. William Hendriksen opines: "Though it was not wrong for the Jew, trained from his infancy in the law, for a period of transition to observe some of these customs as mere customs, having nothing whatever to do with salvation, it was certainly wrong to ascribe to them a value they did not have, and to try to impose them upon the Gentiles." William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 124 (emphasis added). As Francis D. Nichol puts it, "In these verses [16 and 17] Paul has completely removed the ground from beneath the feet of the Judaizing false teachers. They advocated a return to Judaic ceremonial requirements. The

While we need not discard the original "contextual" and "typological" arguments related to Col 2:16, it appears that there is now an ever-enlarging body of evidence—syntactical/linguistic, grammatical, semantic, lexical, inter-textual, structural, computational, soteriological, and functional—which serves to corroborate the traditional/historic Seventh-day Adventist explication that the Greek term *sabbata* in Col 2:16 identifies ceremonial sabbaths, which were fulfilled and thus abrogated by the death of Jesus Christ on Calvary. Intriguingly, in what sounds somewhat like an echo of the original contextual argument made by James White in 1849, non-Adventist Bible commentator Gordon H. Clark succinctly stated in a 1979 publication: "The context [in which *sabbata* is located in Colossians] speaks of food and drink, feasts, and new moon. All this is ceremonial."¹¹⁷ Then revealing his conclusion, Clark rhetorically added: "Then are not the sabbaths, here condemned, ceremonial sabbaths?"¹¹⁸ In contradistinction to the ritual sabbaths referred to in Col 2:16, the weekly Sabbath day, as an enduring memorial to creation, remains as a valid part of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:8–11), a holy day of delight (Isa 58:13) to be rightly celebrated as a divine blessing for all humanity (Mark 2:27).

apostle meets their arguments by asserting that the shadows have served their function now that Christ the reality has come." Nichol, *SDABC*, 7:206. Thus, as Wood stated in his overview of Adventist research on Col 2:16–17, it has been concluded that to perform these "ceremonial rites as a means of salvation" is "an implicit denial of the fact that Jesus was the Messiah." Wood, "The 'Sabbath Days' of Colossians," 338. Similarly, Robert W. Wall concluded: "Thus, for the Christian to participate in these Jewish celebrations was tantamount to a denial of Jesus' messiahship." Robert W. Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 121.

¹¹⁷ Gordon H. Clark, *Colossians: Another Commentary on an Inexhaustible Message* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 96.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*