

Historical Background of the Epistle to the Hebrews

Motivation

The Book of Hebrews presents the Lord Jesus as “better” κρείττων (Strong 2909) than the institutions of Israel. The Lord Jesus is better than the angels, better than Moses, a better priest than Levi, presiding over a better covenant and ministering in a better sanctuary. This competitive stance reflects a tension between church and synagogue. Today, we scan Acts to trace the development of the tension, and identify what motivated it on the part of the Jews.

Background in Acts

Acts 3-5

The first episode arises when Peter and John, as faithful Jews, go up together to the temple at the hour of prayer to do their Jewish duty. Along the way, a miracle happens (chart).

Act 3:2 And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms of them that entered into the temple; ... 6 Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk. 7 And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. 8 And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God.

The healing attracts great attention, drawing a crowd, to whom Peter preaches. Their message disturbs the Jewish rulers, who arrest them, and forbid them to continue such behavior:

Act 4:1 And as they spake unto the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them, 2 Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3 And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day: for it was now eventide. ... 18 And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. 20 For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. 21 So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done.

In chapter 5, the miracles continue. So does the attention—and opposition.

Act 5:12 And by the hands of the apostles were **many signs and wonders** wrought among the people; (and they [the apostles] were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. 13 And of the rest [other than the apostles] durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them.¹ 14 And believers were the more added to the Lord, **multitudes** both of men and women.) 15 Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of

¹ Following McGarvey and Witherington, only the apostles preached together openly in the temple. Whether through fear of the Jewish leaders or apprehension of the apostolic power demonstrated with Ananias and Sapphira, others, including believers, were cautious to draw too close to them.

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them. 16 There came also a **multitude** out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them which were vexed with unclean spirits: and **they were healed every one**. 17 Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were **filled with indignation** ζηλος, 18 And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison.

This episode is particularly revealing. The motive of the Jewish opposition was “indignation,” ζηλος (Strong 2205). The word can mean simply “strong feelings,” reflected in its English derivative “zeal.” But in the LXX it is both dominant and dedicated as the translation of the root קנא, which describes the jealousy of God, and we’ll see a good reason to understand it in this sense here.² The leaders are jealous that the Christians have something they do not.

Luke’s insight recalls an observation by Matthew at the trial of our Lord:

Mat 27:17 Therefore when they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ? 18 For he knew that for **envy φθονος** (Strong 5355) they had delivered him.

“Envy” translates a less common Greek word that overlaps with the “jealousy” meaning of ζηλος. It does not appear in the LXX of the canonical books of the OT. The Jewish leaders were envious of our Lord’s popular appeal and the miracles that he did. They wanted that kind of prestige. The jealousy of the leaders over the miracles and popularity of the early church is a continuation of that envy against the Lord Jesus.

Luke’s record of Stephen’s trial may allude to his diagnosis of the Jewish opposition. Stephen recalls the history of Joseph:

Act 7:9 And the patriarchs, **moved with envy ζηλωω**, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him,

Luke is not the only one who sees envy as the driver of the conflict. Stephen’s analysis of Joseph’s history is a rebuke to the Jewish leaders who were envious against their brother, Messiah the son of Joseph, and his Jewish followers.

The persecution of Stephen is followed in Acts 8 and 9 by Saul’s campaign against the church. Later, he describes his motive as ζηλος, jealousy.

Phi 3:6 Concerning **zeal**, persecuting the church

The attitude of jealousy or envy characterizes someone who is in bondage to the Pride of Life, and Paul includes both terms in the works of the flesh:

Gal 5:19 Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, 20 Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, **emulations ζηλος**, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, 21 **Envyings φθονος**, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like:

Acts 11, Peter’s report to Jerusalem about Cornelius

Contrast the attitude of the temple leaders with that of another group of Jews, who were followers of the Lord Jesus. Acts 10 recounts how the Lord sent Peter to preach to Cornelius, a Roman centurion who was attracted to the teachings of Judaism but had not converted. Peter, as

² See notes.

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an observant Jew, feared defilement from entering a Gentile home, but the Lord spoke to him in a vision, and he obediently went his way. He had barely begun his presentation when the Spirit brought faith upon Cornelius and his family:

Act 10:44 While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. 45 And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. 46 For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, 47 Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he encountered some resistance from other believers:

Act 11:2 And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, 3 Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them.

Their protest is entirely reasonable. The dietary laws were a prominent part of Judaism, firmly rooted in Leviticus 11. How could an observant Jew accept the hospitality of Gentiles, which would inevitably involve eating together?

Peter recounted his experience, including the details of the vision, and the miraculous intervention as he began to speak:

Act 11:15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. 16 Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. 17 Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God? 18 When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

What is the difference between these Jewish believers and the Jewish leaders? Later, when James and others responsible for the Jerusalem church speak with Paul, they use a cognate of ζήλος (in its more generic sense) to describe the enthusiasm of the Jewish Christians for the law:

Act 21:20 Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all **zealous ζηλωτης** of the law:

The Jews who challenge Paul in 11:2 are “zealous of the law,” yet they are not jealous when the miracles of Pentecost are shared with the Gentiles. What makes the difference?

Recall that envy and jealousy (“emulations” and “envyings”) are both among the works of the flesh in Gal 5:19-21. But those to whom the Lord has given his Holy Spirit are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit:

Gal 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, 23 Meekness, temperance:

The leading element, love, “envieth ζηλωω not” (1 Cor 13:4). Those governed by God’s Spirit do not envy the success of others, but rejoice with them. Recall the attitude of John the Baptist, when told of the growing popularity of Jesus:

Joh 3:25 Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. 26 And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee

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beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him.

“The Jews” tempt him to envy Jesus as a rival. But he refuses to succumb:

Joh 3:27 John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. 28 Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. 29 He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease.

Another example is Paul. After his arrest, he was unable to travel and minister widely as he had done, and others sought to claim his position of preeminence.

Phi 1:14 And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. 15 Some indeed preach Christ even of **envy φθονος** and strife; and some also of good will:

Note two different attitudes on the part of those who stepped into the gap that Paul had left. Some were honoring him by carrying on his work, but others were driven by “envy,” seeking to seize the preeminent position that he had enjoyed. We might expect Paul to respond in like measure, but governed by God’s Spirit, he does not:

Phi 1:18 What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.

Yet another example of how the Spirit subdues envy in believers is in the history of the first missionary journey, which we consider next.

As we read through the rest of the book of Acts, the tension between “the Jews” and the believers continues, and in each case this opposition is associated with the enthusiastic response that the believers receive in presenting the gospel.

Episodes during the first missionary journey (chart)

The first missionary journey begins in Acts 13, when the Lord instructs the church in Antioch in Syria to send out a missionary team. Note the words of the instruction:

Act 13:2 As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me **Barnabas and Saul** for the work whereunto I have called them. 3 And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

Barnabas is clearly the senior member of the team. He is the one whom believers in Jerusalem sent to encourage the new church in Antioch (11:22). He is the one who sought out Saul in Tarsus, where he had fled after intense persecution by the Jews (11:25). When the church in Antioch sends famine relief to Jerusalem, Barnabas leads the team (11:30). He is the first in the list of teachers in Antioch in 13:1, while Saul is the last. And when Sergius Paulus, the Roman consul of Crete, wanted to learn more about the newcomers, he asks for “Barnabas and Saul” (13:7). But the Holy Spirit moved Saul to take the lead in the encounter, and by the time the team leaves Crete, they are “Paul and Barnabas.” Here is another example of potential envy overcome by the Holy Spirit. Barnabas could have clung jealously to his position as head of the team, but instead he submits to the Lord’s direction.

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When Paul and Barnabas preach in Asian Antioch at the beginning of the first missionary journey, envy ζηλος continues to drive the Jewish response to the success of the gospel:

Act 13:43 Now when the congregation was broken up, **many** of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. 44 And the next sabbath day came almost **the whole city** together to hear the word of God. 45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, **they were filled with envy**, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. ... 50 But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts. 51 But they shook off the dust of their feet against them, and came unto Iconium.

In Iconium, again the magnitude of the response stimulates Jewish opposition:

Acts 14:1 And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake, that **a great multitude** both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed. 2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren. ... 5 And when there was an assault made both of the Gentiles, and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use them despitefully, and to stone them, 6 They were ware of it, and fled unto Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and unto the region that lieth round about:

The hatred of the Jews from Antioch and Iconium was so strong that they pursued Paul to Lystra as well (v. 19).

Acts 15, the Jerusalem conference

After this hostility from unbelieving Jews, Acts 15, like Acts 11, records how zealous Jews within the church responded to the growing response. Paul and Barnabas have returned to Syrian Antioch, but encounter visitors from Jerusalem:

Act 15:1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

As in Acts 11, the believing Jews have questions about what is happening with Gentiles. Since the visitors come from Judaea, the church decides to consult directly with the apostles (chart).

2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. 3 And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren. 4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. 5 But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

The issue was not obvious. The OT clearly taught that Gentiles would be saved, but it was always understood this would involve conversion to Judaism. But Cornelius received the gift of the Holy Spirit, the hallmark of the New Covenant, without accepting circumcision, and now Paul and Barnabas report similar results. So James recommends that Gentile converts should simply abstain from some practices that were particularly offensive to Jews,

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Act 15:20 from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.

These restrictions were not because Gentiles had to keep the ceremonial law, but to avoid unnecessary offense to Old Testament saints who had not yet heard the gospel.

The church agreed to communicate this conclusion to the new Gentile churches. Note the emphasis in their letter on the unanimity that the Lord gave them:

Act 15:23 And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: 24 Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: 25 It seemed good unto us, being assembled **with one accord**, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; 29 That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

This conclusion is represented as the universal conclusion of the entire group, including the ones who earlier had advocated requiring circumcision. Again, the presence of the Spirit in the believers enabled them to avoid envy and come to a resolution.

Second missionary journey (chart)

At the start of the second missionary journey, returning to Lystra-Derbe, Paul selects Timothy as his helper. Timothy's mother is a converted Jewess, so by Jewish tradition he is Jewish, though his father was a Gentile, but Paul circumcises him to avoid unnecessary offense:

Act 16:1 Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: 2 Which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek.

But in Thessalonica, the strong response to the gospel, especially among Greeks, leads to Jewish opposition. A sizeable and ancient minority of manuscripts, followed by the TR, refer explicitly to envy in this case, but the pattern confirms this motive in any case:

Act 17:1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: 2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, ... 4 And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks **a great multitude**, and of the chief women not a few. 5 But the Jews which believed not, **moved with envy ζηλωω (lacking in MT)**, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.

The same pattern is repeated in Berea (where the adversaries from Thessalonica seek to disrupt a favorable response by Berean Jews) (17:10-13), Corinth (18:4-13), and Ephesus (18:19-19:9).

Final Days in Jerusalem

Paul's final experiences in Jerusalem show the same contrast between hostility from envious unbelievers and acceptance by the Jewish believers.

Act 21:18 And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present. 19 And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry. 20 And when they heard it, **they glorified the Lord**, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law: 21 And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. 22 What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come. 23 Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them. 24 Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law.

Paul himself undertook a vow involving shaving his hair when leaving Corinth (18:18). So James is not asking him to do anything he would not have done himself.

Acts 21:25 As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication. 26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them. 27 And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, **stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him**, 28 Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place.

Paul's practice clearly distinguishes between Jewish and Gentile believers. He is comfortable with Jewish believers continuing to observe Jewish practices, and in fact does so himself. But he resists imposing these regulations on Gentiles.

Throughout the rest of the book, in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin (ch. 23), and in Caesaria before Felix (ch. 24) and Festus (ch. 25), unbelieving Jews continue to oppose him.

Our studies in Isaiah and Psalms have shown us how the Old Testament looked forward to the Messiah, and Matthew's record shows us the miracles that attended the Lord's coming and the enthusiasm of the common people for his message. But not everybody was ready to welcome the king. Some were quite comfortable with their prestige under the status quo. A rival leader with miracles and multitudes was a threat to their position. It is no surprise that Matthew characterizes their opposition to our Lord as envy φθονος, and that Luke interprets their opposition to his followers as jealousy ζηλος. This pattern of conflict between the prestige of an existing institution and the dynamic work of the Spirit will be critical for our understanding of Hebrews.

Romans

Relevance of Romans to Hebrews

There is some evidence that Hebrews was written to a community of Jewish believers in Rome. The conclusion includes special greetings from Italian expatriates (chart):

Heb 13:24 They of [from] Italy salute you.

This greeting suggests that “they from Italy” came from the fellowship to which the letter is written. In addition, Clement of Rome quotes the book extensively at the end of the first century, showing that it was known there.³ What do we know about Jewish-Christian relations in Rome?

Paul probably wrote Romans from Corinth toward the end of his third missionary journey, during the visit mentioned in Acts 20:1, 2.⁴ In Corinth, he had learned of recent actions by Rome against Jews in the city, which may have been stimulated by Jewish-Christian tensions.⁵

Act 18:1 After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth; 2 And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them. 3 And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers.

Paul may write to encourage the Romans because of what he learned from Priscilla and Aquila.

Claudius had not completely purged Rome, as we see when Paul arrived there in Acts 28.

Act 28:16 And when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard: but Paul was suffered to dwell by himself with a soldier that kept him. 17 And it came to pass, that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together: and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people, or customs of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. 18 Who, when they had examined me, would have let me go, because there was no cause of death in me. 19 But when the Jews spake against it, I was constrained to appeal unto Caesar; not that I had ought to accuse my nation of. 20 For this cause therefore have I called for you, to see you, and to speak with you: because that for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain. 21 And they said unto him, We neither received letters out of Judaea concerning thee, neither any of the brethren that came shewed or spake any harm of thee. 22 But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this

3 But he also quotes about half of the other books: <https://etimasthe.com/2018/02/14/clement-of-romes-new-testament/>

4 Thus Leon Morris: “The epistle seems to have been written in Corinth. Paul commends Phoebe, a lady from Cenchraea, the port of that city (16:1). His host is Gaius (16:23), and Gaius is the name of a man Paul baptized at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14). Erastus, Timothy, and Sopater were with Paul when Romans was written (16:21, 23) and also when he was in Greece (Acts 19:22; 20:2–4). Both times Paul intended to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome (Acts 19:21; Rom. 15:24–26, 28). The object of his immediate journey was to take money to the poor saints at Jerusalem (Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:26–28). All this makes it conclusive that Paul was writing from Corinth just before he travelled to Jerusalem.”

5 According to the historian Suetonius, writing around AD 100, Claudius was motivated by Jewish riots “instigated by Chrestus.” The name is a common misspelling for Christ, and these riots are probably similar to the disturbances we have already seen throughout the book of Acts when some Jews responded to the gospel, incurring the jealousy of those who did not.

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sect, we know that every where it is spoken against. 23 And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. 24 And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not. 25 And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, 26 Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: 27 For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. 28 Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it. 29 And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves.

As elsewhere, the Jews were divided over the question of the Messiah. Some believed, while some did not (v. 24), and Paul discusses both groups in his epistle.

Overview of Romans

Within the standard letter frame, Romans follows Paul's usual pattern of exposition followed by exhortations (Figure 1, chart). Each section has a summary, and each discusses Jews and Gentiles.

The doctrinal summary presents two pairs that generate the rest of the section: Jew and Gentile, and the God's wrath and righteousness:

Rom 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the **Jew** first, and also to the **Greek**. 17 For therein is the **righteousness** of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. 18 For the **wrath** of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;

The practical summary emphasizes our duty to serve God, and our relation to the world around us:

Rom 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye **present your bodies a living sacrifice**, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And be not conformed to **this world**: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Romans 10-11, The Jews and the Righteousness of God

In chapters 1-11, and especially 10-11, Paul focuses on unsaved Jews. After describing Israel's present apostasy in ch. 10, Paul anticipates their future salvation (after the Gentiles) in ch. 11.

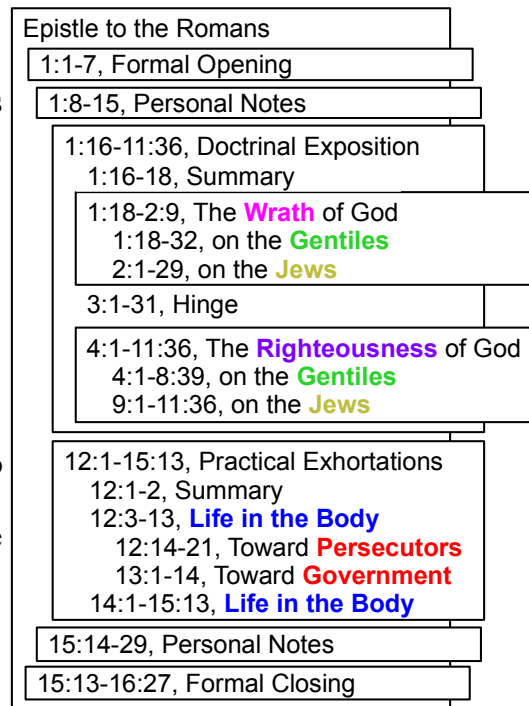


Figure 1: Structure of the Epistle to the Romans

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Vocabulary related to the terms for jealousy that we saw in Acts appears in both chapters.

In describing Israel's failure in chapter 10, Paul presents the role of the preacher in vv. 14-17. But Israel has not received the message, a failing anticipated by three Old Testament texts (chart). First, Psalm 19 claims that the message is universally available:

Rom 10:17 So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. 18 But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, [Psa 19:4] their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world.

Next, Moses predicts Israel's jealousy about the Gentiles, which we have seen in Acts:

Rom 10:19 But I say, Did not Israel know? First Moses saith [Deut 32:21], **I will provoke you to jealousy παραζηλω** by them that are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you.

Finally, Isaiah contrasts the response of Jews and Gentiles to the gospel:

Rom 10:20 But Esaias is very bold, and saith [Isa 65:1-2], I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me. 21 But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.

The second of these quotations invites further attention. As often in Paul's quotations, he has the fuller OT text in mind. Deuteronomy 32 is God's *rib* against Israel, anticipating her idolatry and declaring his judgment. Here's a broader citation of Deut 32:21.

Deu 32:21 They have **moved me to jealousy** with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will **move them to jealousy** with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.

The jealousy of Israel in Acts is God's judgment on the nation, in response to their idolatry throughout the Old Testament. It is an example of the fundamental principle of biblical justice, that the offender should receive the same harm he has inflicted on his victim. They have made God jealous, so he will make them jealous

The theme of jealousy recurs in chapter 11, where Paul looks forward to Israel's salvation.

Rom 11:11 I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to **provoke them to jealousy παραζηλω**. 12 Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness? 13 For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: 14 If by any means I may **provoke to emulation παραζηλω** them which are my flesh, and might save some of them.

Paul sees the jealousy as a positive influence. He hopes that his mission to the Gentiles will increase their jealousy to move them to seek salvation.

Romans 14-15, Jew and Gentile in the Church

The outer panels in the exhortation section of Romans deal with the relation of believers to one another. The first panel, 12:3-13, discusses the role of different gifts in the body. Like the corresponding passages in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, the principle of spiritual gifts emphasizes the unity of the body within which they function:

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Rom 12:4 For as we have many members in **one body**, and all members have not the same office: 5 So we, being many, are **one body** in Christ, and every one members one of another.

The last panel, 14:1-15:3, focuses on a specific challenge to this unity, which we have already seen in Acts 11 and Acts 15: the tension between Jewish believers and Gentile believers within the church. It's fine to say that "the fruit of the Spirit is love," and "love envieth not," but while every believer has the Spirit, not every believer is walking in the Spirit, and much of Paul's exhortation in the epistles is focused on increasing people's submission to the Spirit's leading.

At the start of Romans 14, Paul rebukes the believers for their disagreements:

Rom 14:1 Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.

These disagreements were over two sets of issues, described chiasmically (Table 1, chart): clean vs. unclean foods, and holy days. These are two central issues of Jewish practice, and it seems clear that this instruction is responding to tensions in the church between the Jewish and Gentile believers.

		Defined	Resolved
Issues:	Clean & unclean food	2 For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. 3 Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. 4 Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.	6b He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.
	Holy days	5 One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.	6a He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it.

Table 1: Structure of Rom 14:1-6

The Jewish believers, like young Daniel, ate

a vegetarian diet rather than risk unclean meats in a largely pagan environment, and honored the calendrical restrictions of the law. The Gentile believers saw no reason to do either, and the two groups were in contention with one another. Paul urges two principles. 1) Each should order his conduct, not by what he thinks others in the assembly will think, but by his need to answer to the Lord. 2) They must not judge one another, but live in unity.

Rom 14:7 For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. 8 For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living. 10 But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. 11 For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. 12 So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

This attitude reflects the policy that governs Paul's conduct throughout his ministry, as he outlines in 1 Corinthians 9 (chart),

1Co 9:20 And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; 21 To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. 22 To the weak became I as weak, that I might

gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. 23 And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.

An Illustration of Romans 14: Peter in Antioch

We have an illustration of the attitude that Paul articulated in 1 Corinthians 9 and Romans 14, in his earlier behavior in Antioch, recorded in Galatians 2.⁶ The context is a series of trips recorded in Acts 14-15 and Galatians 2 (Figure 2, chart).

When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from their first missionary journey, they ministered there “a long time” (Acts 14:28). During that time, the Gentile believers in that fellowship were under pressure from visitors from Judaea:

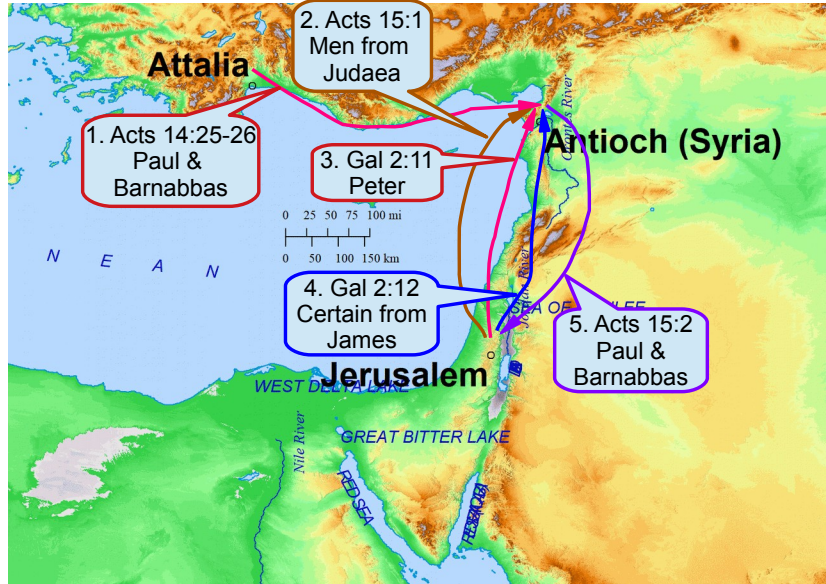


Figure 2: Visits Leading to Acts 15

Act 15:1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

This tension in the oldest church outside of Jerusalem aroused considerable attention back in Jerusalem. Between 15:1 and 15:2, several delegations come to investigate. Peter himself came to see what was going on.

Gal 2:11 But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. 12a For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles:

When Peter first arrived in Antioch, he did not hesitate to eat with the Gentile believers, just as he had done with Cornelius. After all, Peter was the first to introduce the notion of the equality of Gentile converts to the Jerusalem church in Acts 11. As Paul later states in 1 Corinthians 9, he was willing to become a Greek to the Greeks.

Peter was not the only visitor to come to investigate. After he had been in Antioch for a time, “certain came from James.” As appears from Acts 15, James was the preeminent brother in the Jerusalem meeting. He is probably our Lord’s half-brother, and the author of the epistle that bears his name, noted for his piety and faithful observance of Jewish custom. James himself did not come, but “certain ... from James,” some people sent by him to review the situation. The appearance of this delegation from the very conservative Jerusalem leadership led Peter to become more cautious in his relations with the Gentile believers in Antioch.

⁶ Galatians was probably written during the “long time” in Antioch of Acts 14:28, to the converts of the first missionary journey, but preceding the conference in Acts 15. There is an extensive literature on the dating of Galatians. I prefer the earlier dating, largely because Paul does not cite the conclusion of the Jerusalem conference, which, had it already taken place, would have been decisive for the central question he is discussing.

Historical Background

Gal 2:12b but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. 13 And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.

On their arrival, Peter refused to eat together with the local believers, apparently wanting to avoid offending the new visitors. But in doing so, he would naturally offend his brothers and sisters in Antioch.

Paul has no patience with this equivocation.

Gal 2:14 But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?

He “blows Peter’s cover,” revealing publicly that Peter has in fact been dining with the Gentiles, and condemns him for now rejecting them for the sake of impressing the more traditional believers recently arrived from James.

So Antioch was the flash point for the tension between Jewish and Gentile believers. It sent out the first missionaries to the Gentile world, and when they returned, at least three sets of visitors from Jerusalem came to engage this question: “certain men ... from Judaea” in Acts 15:1, Peter in Gal 2:11, and the delegation from James in Gal 2:12. Finally the brethren in Antioch took the bull by the horns and sent their own delegation to Jerusalem to settle the question, leading to the conference of Acts 15 that we considered already.

In spite of that conference and Paul’s advocacy of a spirit of toleration, the NT shows that there were continued tensions between traditional Jews and the believers. Satan tried to use Jewish practices, such as dietary restrictions, Sabbath observance, and circumcision, as a wedge to split apart the body of Christ (Figure 3, chart). We are most accustomed to seeing this tension between conservative Jewish Christians and Gentile believers, but Peter’s conduct in Antioch shows that Jewish believers were also at risk of compromising their principles in order to please more conservative Jews.

Two epistles in the NT were written to largely Gentile churches to warn them of this risk: Galatians (written in the midst of the disputes between Acts 14 and Acts 15), and Colossians. We will look at one of these in our next study. I believe Hebrews was written to a largely Jewish church to warn them of the same risk.

Colossians

Paul’s earliest letter, Galatians, was written to Gentiles who were being pressured to receive circumcision in order to be saved. In spite of the conference in Acts 15, this pressure continued, and is the subject of Colossians, one of his last epistles within the span of Acts. It was written, along with Philippians, Ephesians, and Philemon, while Paul was a captive in Rome, AD 60-62. It offers a number of remarkable similarities to Hebrews (see notes).

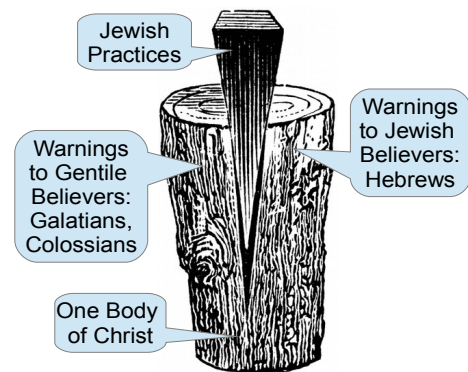


Figure 3: Judaizing Efforts to Divide the Body

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Historical Background

This epistle, like Galatians a decade earlier, warns believers about Jewish traditions (see notes). Its structure is very regular (Figure 4, chart). The opening ends, and the closing begins, with prayer—at the start, Paul for the Colossians, and at the end, his request that they pray for him. Both the opening prayer and the main body of the epistle, like the two parts of Romans, begin with summaries.

1:3-20, Paul's Prayer for the Colossians

The summary (chart) has three parts:

1:3 We **give thanks** to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

praying always for you,

4 **Since we heard** of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, For [because of] the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel;

The rest of the prayer develops these in chiastic order.

1:6-8 (3 vv) describe their faith, hope, and love.

In 1:9-11 (3 vv), Paul asks the Father to give them *knowledge* so that they can *walk* in a way that pleases God. Note the alternation of knowledge and conduct:

9 that ye might be filled with the **knowledge** of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;

10 That ye might **walk worthy** of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every **good work**,

and increasing in the **knowledge** of God;

11 Strengthened with all **might**, according to his glorious power, unto all **patience** and **longsuffering** with joyfulness;

The idea that what they know about God should govern their conduct is central to the rest of the epistle, and in fact of all of Paul's epistles. In general, he begins with *exposition* (seeking to increase their *knowledge of God*, generally expressed with *indicative* verbs), then moves to *exhortation* (dealing with their *worthy walk and good works*, with mainly *volitional* verbs such as imperatives) (chart). In Colossians, these two alternate.

The largest part of the prayer, 1:12-20 (9 vv) returns to the thanksgiving announced in v. 3. This section illustrates "the law of proportion." When one panel of a parallel series is notably larger than the others, pay special attention to it. The amount of space a writer devotes to a theme shows how much he wants to emphasize it.

The theme here is the Lord Jesus—his sonship (13, 15, 18), his work in redeeming us (14, 20), his equality with God (15), his role as creator (16), his preeminence over all creation (17-18).

Epistle to the Colossians
1:1-20, Opening 1-2, Epistolary Greeting 3-20, Paul's Prayer 3-5, Summary 6-20, Development
1:21-4:1, Body 1:21-23, Summary 21-22, Position 23a, Practice 23b, Paul's Ministry 1:24-4:1, Development 1:24-2:3, Paul's Ministry (9vv) 2:4-8, Practice (5vv) 2:9-15, Position (7vv) 2:16-3:9a, Practice (17vv) 3:9b-11, Position (3vv) 3:12-4:1, Practice (15vv)
4:2-18, Closing 2-6, Their Prayer for Paul 7-17, Greetings 18, Epistolary Close

Figure 4: Structure of Colossians

These same themes characterize the opening of Hebrews.

1:21-4:1, The Body of the Epistle

The body, like the prayer, starts with a summary that is later expanded.

1:21-23, Summary

Again, the summary has three parts. First, building off the word “reconcile” in v. 20, he recalls what God has done for them in Christ:

21 And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled 22 In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight:

This statement is the knowledge for which he prayed in vv. 9 and 10c, the seed from which the later sections about our position in Christ grow. It is a fact to be believed.

But the next verse conditions this fact on their conduct, for which he also prayed in 10ab and 11:

23 If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven;

At first, we might understand the reconciliation of v. 21 as dependent on and caused by the steadfast perseverance of v. 23. But note the tenses of the verbs. He does not say, “You will be reconciled . . . if ye continue in the faith.” Rather, the reconciliation is the past tense (aorist), while the conduct of v. 23 is in the present tense, emphasizing something that continues. The conduct of v. 23 does not *cause* their reconciliation to God, but rather is the *evidence* of it. As we saw in 1 John, we know that we have eternal life, because we keep God’s commandments.

The third part of the summary describes Paul’s role in this transaction:

whereof I Paul am made a minister;

So the three themes in the summary are their *position* in Christ, the *practice* that should result from that position, and *Paul’s role*. In the sequel, he will devote one paragraph to his role, then alternate back and forth between their practice (what it means to “continue in the faith,” v. 23) and their position (what it means to be reconciled to God, vv. 21-22).

The position and practice sections, what they know and what they should do, correspond to the common division in many other epistles between a doctrinal exposition and a practical exhortation. But there is an interesting difference. Epistles such as Romans and Ephesians fall clearly into two halves, exposition followed by exhortation. Here, he bounces back and forth between the two. Interestingly, this is also how Hebrews proceeds, alternating between exposition and exhortation.⁷

1:24-2:3, Paul’s Ministry

Paul describes his ministry in terms of a “mystery” that has been committed to him:

1:25 Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to

⁷ The significance of this distinction for the structure of Hebrews has been set forth most completely by George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998.

Historical Background

me for you, to fulfil the word of God; 26 *Even* the **mystery** which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: 27 To whom God would make known what *is* the riches of the glory of this **mystery** among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: ... 2:2 That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the **mystery** of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; 3 In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

“Mystery” is a favorite word of Paul’s. Its only use in the canonical LXX is in Daniel 2, where it describes the “secret” of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream that God revealed to Daniel. Of the 27 instances in the NT, three are in the gospels, where in each of the synoptics the Lord tells his disciples, “To you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 13:11 and Luke 8:10; Mark 4:11 uses the singular, “the mystery”). Four more are in the revelation, but the other 20 are all in Paul, and of those, half are in Ephesians (6x) and Colossians (4x).

It’s helpful to distinguish this word in the Bible from its common English use (chart). In English literature, a “mystery” is something that is unknown, but that people can figure out. In the Bible, mysteries are unknowable by men, but revealed by God.

Our Lord spoke of multiple “mysteries of the kingdom of God.” Here, 1:27 focuses on a specific mystery: “this **mystery** among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you.” The mystery is that Christ should dwell in Gentiles. It is no mystery that the Gentiles would be redeemed. Isaiah and the Psalms make this point repeatedly. But that they should be indwelt by Christ through his Spirit directly, without coming through the door of Judaism, was a complete surprise (and a great offense to many). The “dispensation” given to Paul, the mission committed to him to complete, was to proclaim this great truth. He declares the same “mystery” in Ephesians:

Eph 3:2 If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: 3 How that by revelation he made known unto me the **mystery**; (as I wrote afore in few words, 4 Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the **mystery** of Christ) 5 Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; 6 That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:

Proclaiming this truth is Paul’s great burden, and in this epistle he seeks to defend this insight against those who would seek to subject Gentiles to Jewish custom as a prerequisite to salvation.

2:4-8, Practice (5vv)

In the first practice section, he exhorts them not to pay attention to human traditions that are being urged upon them. We’ll see as we work through the remaining sections that these traditions reflect Jewish teaching.

2:4 And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with **enticing words**. ... 8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after **the tradition of men**, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

2:9-15, Position (7vv)

In support of his exhortation, he reminds them of their position in Christ. Notice how he emphasizes the ways in which they are independent of Judaism.

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First of all, they have no need for physical circumcision, having received something far better:

9 For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. 10 And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: 11 In whom also ye are **circumcised with the circumcision made without hands**, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ:

What matters is not physical circumcision, but the spiritual cleansing they have received. This occurred through their death and resurrection with Christ, pictured in the ceremony of baptism:

12 Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with *him* through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

Some would use the parallel between vv. 11 and 12 to argue that baptism is the analog to circumcision, and thus should be applied to the same people, that is, babies. Both ceremonies did initiate individuals into the people of God. But the argument is too strong—it would suggest that only baby boys should be baptized, while those who think they can baptize infants in fact baptize girls as well. Paul's point is simply that having received spiritual cleaning through their death and resurrection with Christ, they have no need for the physical rite of circumcision. In fact (and this was the point urged by Peter after his experience with Cornelius), it was while they were uncircumcised that God made them alive and forgave them:

13 And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;

Circumcision was only one part of the Jewish law. Paul is much bolder. Every condemnation that the law could bring against them, every accusation that Satan urged against them, has been nailed to the cross of Christ.

14 Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;

Recall that Pilate had the statement of the charges against our Lord to the cross, so that those who witnessed the crucifixion could know the crime for which the victim was suffering. Alongside Pilate's notice was another, far larger one, listing our sins.

15 *And* having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

Our Lord “spoiled” the heavenly powers by taking possession of the people who had been under their control. These are the captives whom he led captive, according to Psalm 68:8.

2:16-3:9a, Practice (17vv)

This is the longest of the sections, and by the law of proportion, deserves special attention.

The first Practice section (2:4-8) began with positive exhortation, then moved to negative warnings. Here, the order is reversed.

The first warning will be familiar to us after Romans 14:

2:16 Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: 17 Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ.

To the mixed congregation in Rome, he urged liberty of conscience, but to the Gentiles in

Historical Background

Colossae, he is more direct. The OT regulations like food and holy days were a shadow, an anticipation, of the coming reality, which is the Messiah, whom he emphasized so strongly in the opening prayer. V. 17 is an excellent summary of the message of Hebrews.⁸

The exhortation continues with a reference to “worshipping of angels.”

18 Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

People usually understand this to refer to worship directed to angels, for which there is little evidence of Jewish practice. However, the genitive can also be understood as subjective, referring to the worship that angels offer to God, and then to the desire of people to participate in this worship.⁹ This is clearly attested in Jewish writings, and is prominent at Qumran. People are always looking for some way to enhance their religious experience, and were being encouraged to think of themselves as participating with the angelic host in their worship.¹⁰ Jewish tradition devoted a great deal of attention to angels, and the Judaizers may have presented themselves as expert guides to a deeper worship experience. But Paul insists that such a focus is misplaced:

19 And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.

Then he returns to the theme of our death with Christ from the previous exposition:

20 Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, 21 (Touch not; taste not; handle not; 22 Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? 23 Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

The positive side of the exposition urges them to focus directly on the Lord Jesus. We do not need to go through angels to get to God; we are one with Christ, who is in the Father’s very presence. (Compare the emphasis of Hebrews on our access into the holiest of all.)

3:1 If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. 2 Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. 3 For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, *who is* our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.

In view of this access, we must do away with the works of the flesh:

5 Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: 6 For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: 7 In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. 8 But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. 9 Lie not one to another,

⁸ σκία “shadow” (Strong 4639) appears only 7x in the NT, and the only book with more than 1 is Hebrews (8:5 and 10:1). These three are the only ones that use the term as a metaphor for the relation of OT revelation to the Messiah.

⁹ The possibility of a subjective genitive was suggested by Zahn and Ewald, according to the Cambridge Greek Testament, but has recently been revived by F.O. Francis, according to Dunn in the NIGTC, who gives extensive documentation.

¹⁰This attitude continues in the liturgical churches in their celebration of the Eucharist, in the words, “Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify your glorious name ... “

3:9b-11, Position (3vv)

He motivates this exhortation by exposition, denying any special privilege to the Jew.

seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; 10 And have put on the new *man*, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: 11 Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond *nor* free: but Christ *is* all, and in all.

3:12-4:1, Practice (15vv)

The final practical section urges them to focus on the fruit of the Spirit (12-14), enjoying God's peace both in their fellowship as a church (15-17) and in their daily personal relations in the home and workplace (3:18-4:1).

So throughout this epistle, Paul is warning the Colossians not to be led astray with false traditions, traditions with strongly Jewish characteristics. Such an influence would distract them from the main focus of their devotion, the Lord Jesus, through whom they have direct access to the Father. Note the emphasis he places on our Lord throughout (chart):

- By far the largest part of his opening prayer exalts the Savior.
- The first Practice section (2:8) contrasts **“the tradition of men”** with **“Christ.”**
- The first Position section (2:10) tells them, “ye are complete in him,” and our death and resurrection with him constitutes a spiritual circumcision (2:11) that makes physical circumcision unnecessary.
- The second Practice section begins (2:17) contrasting the shadow of Jewish tradition with the body, that is, the Messiah. Instead of pursuing Jewish modes of worship, they must “hold fast the head” (2:19).
- The final Position section reminds them that “Christ is all, and in all.”

The answer to the tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers is a focus on the Savior. Recall the principle in 1 John,

1Jo 1:3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

As we draw close to the Father and his Son, we will come closer to one another. Any unity among us based on shared creed, or common practices, will be incomplete, and as much as it binds us to some believers, will separate us from others. But the closer we come to the Lord Jesus, the closer we come to each other.

This warning was clearly needed by Gentile converts who, having received the Lord Jesus and recognized the authority of the OT scriptures, might be tempted to look to the Jewish community who had been the custodian of that revelation. But Jewish believers were also at risk. As the opposition of the synagogue to the Lord's claims hardened, it would be difficult for Jewish Christians to abandon those with whom they had worshipped. For them also, Jewish traditions were a stumbling block, and the epistle to the Hebrews was written to encourage them, as Paul has encouraged the Colossians, to see these traditions as “the shadow,” whose “substance belongs to the Christ.”

Notes

ζηλος and Cognates in the LXX

	קנא	קנא	קנא	חרה		
ζηλος	28	-	-			
ζηλω	1	26	1			
παραζηλω		4		3		
ζηλωσις	3					
ζηλωτης		5	1			

Col 1:12-20 and Heb 1:1-10

Col 1:12 Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: 13 Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of **his dear Son**: 14 **In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins**: 15 Who is **the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature**: 16 For **by him were all things created**, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be **thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers**: all things were created by him, and for him: 17 And he is before all things, and **by him all things consist**. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, **the firstborn from the dead**; that **in all things he might have the preeminence**. 19 For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; 20 And, **having made peace through the blood of his cross**, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

Heb 1:1 God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, 2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by **his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds**; 3 Who being the brightness of his glory, and **the express image of his person**, and upholding all things by the word of his power, **when he had by himself purged our sins**, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; 4 Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath **by inheritance** obtained a more excellent name than they. 5 For unto which of the angels said he at any time, **Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee**? And again, **I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son**? 6 And again, when he bringeth in the **firstbegotten** into the world, he saith, And **let all the angels of God worship him**. 7 And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire. 8 But unto the Son he saith, **Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom**. 9 Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. 10 And, **Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands**: 11 They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; 12 And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail. 13 But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until **I make thine enemies thy footstool**? 14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

Parallels between Colossians and Hebrews

- Focus on the person of Christ (Col 1:12-20; Heb 1:1-10)
- Repeated alternation of Exposition and Exhortation
- OT symbols as shadows of Christ (Col 2:17; Heb 8:5; 10:1)
 - Col 2:17 Which are a **shadow** of things to come; but the body is of Christ.
 - Heb 8:5 Who serve unto the example and **shadow** of heavenly things,
 - Heb 10:1 For the law having a **shadow** of good things to come, and not the very image of the things ...

Jewish Traditions in Colossians

Here is a list of references to Jewish practices that we identified in Colossians.

- 2:8 the tradition of men
- 2:11 ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands
- 2:14 Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us
- 2:16 Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days
- 2:18 worshipping of (by) angels
- 2:20 ordinances, 21 (Touch not; taste not; handle not; ...
- 3:10 the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: 11 Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, ...