

THESIS ABSTRACT

Master of Divinity

Adventist University of Africa

Theological Seminary

Title: EXEGETICAL STUDY OF THE TERM ΣΑΒΒΑΤΩΝ IN COLOSSIANS 2:16 AND PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS FOR LAY PREACHERS IN CENTRAL GHANA CONFERENCE

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Date Completed: January 2026

This thesis re-examines the meaning and referent of σαββάτων (*sabbatōn*) in Colossians 2:16 within Paul's wider paraenetic argument (Col 2:6-23). It evaluates the theological and pastoral implications of the passage for lay preaching in the Central Ghana Conference. The study addresses a persistent interpretive dispute in which Colossians 2:16-17 is often deployed either to annul weekly Sabbath observance or to restrict Paul's warning to "ceremonial" days, often without sustained attention to the practical demands of congregational instruction.

Methodologically, the thesis employs a historical-grammatical approach integrating lexical-semantic analysis, syntactical and structural observation, and intertextual comparison with Old Testament and Second Temple patterns that illuminate Paul's calendrical triad ("festival, new moon, sabbaths"). Particular

attention is given to the rhetorical function of Colossians 2:16 as a conclusion flowing from Paul's christological claims about fullness in Christ and the invalidation of "ordinances" as grounds for spiritual status, as well as to the socio-religious pressures facing a mixed congregation exposed to ritualism, ascetic regulations, and mystically inflected spirituality.

The study argues that the anarthrous *sabbata* in Colossians 2:16 operate within a stock calendrical formula whose Old Testament usage is repeatedly embedded in sacrificial contexts, thereby supporting the conclusion that Paul's target is the cultic-ceremonial complex of sacred times, together with the food-and-drink regulations and offering practices associated with them, functioning as "shadows" now eclipsed by the christological "substance." On this reading, Paul's polemic is directed toward ritualised and judgment-producing features of sacred-time observance rather than toward the creational and covenantal rationale of the Decalogue's Sabbath command. The thesis further contends that Paul's instruction is simultaneously functional, addressing a concrete Colossian crisis of condemnation, and normatively enduring in its theological principles: Christ's sufficiency, the rejection of ritual criteria for spiritual hierarchy, and the incompatibility of judgmentalism with the gospel. Finally, the thesis distils pastoral directives for lay preachers, emphasising disciplined contextual exegesis, Christologically framed Sabbath teaching that avoids both legalism and antinomianism, and practical strategies for public apologetics and interdenominational engagement in Ghana's contested Sabbath discourse.

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A thesis

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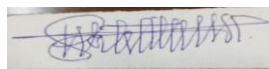
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To God be the Glory.

Dedicated to my wife, Catherine; my kids: Michelle, Wesley, Fanny,
Eden; and to my immediate past President for the Central
Ghana Conference and wife, Pr. Yaw and
Mrs. Janet Asamoah Kwarteng.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BDAG	Bauer, Walter, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.
BRI	Biblical Research Institute.
IRBS	Journal of IRBS Theological Seminary.
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, A Greek-English Lexicon.
LXX	Septuagint (Greek Old Testament).
NIV	New International Version.
NKJV	New King James Version.
NT	New Testament.
OT	Old Testament.
PP	Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets.
SCM	Student Christian Movement Press.
SDABC	Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary.
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
TDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am profoundly grateful to God for His grace, mercy, and abiding favour throughout this academic journey. The completion of this study is ultimately a testimony to His sustaining strength, guidance, and providential care at every stage of the research, writing, and revision process.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to my family for their unwavering love and support. To my wife, Catherine, I remain deeply indebted for her patience, sacrifices, encouragement, and steadfast partnership throughout the demanding seasons of study. To my children, Michelle, Wesley, Fanny, and Eden, I am grateful for your understanding, prayers, and the joy you brought into my life, even when academic responsibilities limited my time. I also acknowledge my siblings with sincere gratitude for their continued encouragement, practical support, and confidence in my capacity to complete this work.

I wish to express sincere appreciation to my Conference President and his wife, Pr. And Mrs Asamoah Kwarteng, for their encouragement, leadership support, and personal concern throughout my studies. Their interest and moral support contributed meaningfully to my perseverance and progress.

I am also grateful to my fellow students whose fellowship, scholarly engagement, and camaraderie enriched my academic experience. Specially, I acknowledge Pastor Israel Oheneba-Bobie for his support, collegiality, and encouragement during the course of this programme.

Finally, I acknowledge the Central Ghana Conference for the institutional support provided throughout my studies. The Conference's assistance and commitment to ministerial development contributed significantly to the successful completion of this research.

To all who supported me in diverse ways, through prayer, counsel, motivation, and practical help, I offer my sincere appreciation.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Sabbath,¹ as a day of rest and worship, has been a central institution since the inception of the Judeo-Christian faith. Biblically, its roots trace back to the creation account where God sanctified the seventh day (Gen. 2:2-3), and to the Decalogue where the fourth commandment enjoins the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8-11). In the early Christian church, however, the understanding and practice of the Sabbath evolved amid the shift from a predominantly Jewish context to a Gentile-inclusive community.² By the late first-second centuries, questions arose regarding the continuing role of Sabbath-keeping, especially as the apostolic church emphasised salvation through Christ alone apart from the ritual laws of Judaism.³ One particular passage in Col 2:16-17, within the broader unit of 2:6-23, stands at the heart of this discussion. In this passage, Paul writes: “Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (Col 2:16-17 NKJV). The meaning of

¹ *Sabbatōn* in Greek.

² Richard Bauckham, “Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 251-298; Valeriy A. (Andrei) Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 36-38, 79-91; Justin Martyr, First Apology 67, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 186-187.

³ Charles H. Savelle, “Acts 15:21: Moses Is Preached and Read in the Synagogues,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 65, no. 4 (2022): 707-713; Bauckham, 257-262, 270-276.

sabbatōn in Colossians 2:16 has been variously interpreted, causing considerable debate among Bible scholars over the text's interpretation.⁴ Notably, the term is mentioned only once as far as the theological section of the New Testament is concerned, despite the frequent mention of *sabbatōn* or *sabbata* in the Gospels and the historical book of Acts.⁵ The uniqueness of this reference has made Col 2:16-23 one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament to exegetically interpret, as Angel Manuel Rodriguez observes.⁶ How one interprets and understands *sabbatōn* in this text carries significant theological and practical implications for Christian practice.

Throughout Christian history, two broad interpretations of *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 have emerged. Some Bible scholars interpret *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 as referring to the weekly Sabbath.⁷ According to them, the sabbath is no longer binding as far as Christianity is concerned and has been nailed to the cross with the rest of the

⁴ Everett F. Harrison, *Colossians: Christ All-Sufficient* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 65; Wilbur Fields, Philipppains, *Colossians & Philemon* (Missouri: College Press, 1988), 112; Curtis Vaughan, *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary* Vol. 2, NT, ed. Kenneth L. Barker & John R. Kohlenberger III (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 830; Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, David Brown, Jamieson, *Fausset & Brown's Commentary on the whole Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1961), 1322; "Sabbath days," (Col 2:16), *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (SDAC), ed. Francis. D. Nichol (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002), 7:205, 206; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 114, 115; Guy H. King, *Crossing the Border: An Expositional Study of Colossians* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1974), 64; Oliver B. Greene, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians* (Greenville, CA: Gospel Hour, 1970), 147, 148; Francis W. Beare, "Colossians: Introduction and Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 200.

⁵ David W. Cloud, *Avoid the Snare of Seventh-day Adventism* (Oak Harbor, WA: Way of Life Literature, 1999), 30.

⁶ Angel Manuel Rodriguez, "The Biblical Sabbath: The Adventist Perspective," accessed May 5, 2024, <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/the-biblical-sabbath-the-adventist-perspective>.

⁷ John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1965), s.v. "Sabbath," who states: "Paul affirms that no one may be called to account for Sabbath observance (Col 2:16); B. H. Carroll, *Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews*, An Interpretation of the English Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1948), 51.

Mosaic code. According to Guy H. King, *sabbatōn* is the weekly seventh day, which is changed now to the first day, “under the New Economy of Grace, however, all is altered—even ‘the Sabbath day’ is, with Divine blessing, changed from the seventh to the first. No Gentile convert is to be ‘judged’, condemned, because of non-compliance with these ancient requirements.”⁸ Some scholars add that the weekly Sabbath was an ancient requirement of the Jews, which was nailed to the cross.

Therefore, Christians must observe the first day rather and should not be judged because of this.⁹ The study, however, observes a lack of conceptual link between the text and its related background texts in the Old Testament, which the author alludes to. As some have identified, there are some linguistic and conceptual link of allusion such as eating, drinking, yearly festival, new moon, and sabbaths shared by Colossians 2:16 and 1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 2:3; 8:13; 31:3; Ezekiel 45:17; Hosea 2:11.¹⁰ This lack of full exploration of the intertextual context of the passage has limited the explanation to what Paul meant by *χειρόγραφον* (ordinances), “that was against us.” Other Bible scholars interpret the text as not

⁸ Guy H. King, *Crossing the Border: An Expositional Study of Colossians* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1974), 64.

⁹ See also Curtis Vaughan, *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary Vol. 2, NT*, ed. Kenneth L. Barker & John R. Kohlenberger III (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 830; Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, vol. 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 388, 389; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 114, 115; Solomon Andria, *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1453; R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon: The Fellowship of the Gospel and the Supremacy of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 288-289; David M. Hay, *Colossians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 104; George H. van Kooten, *Cosmic Christology in Paul and Pauline School: Colossians and Ephesians in the Context of Graeco-Roman Cosmology, with a New Synopsis of the Greek Texts*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2 Reihe 171 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 138; Roy Yates, *The Epistle to the Colossians*, Epworth Commentaries (London, Epworth, 1993), 58; Peter H. Davids, *Colossians, Philemon*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2008), 278.

¹⁰ Edwin Reynolds (2009), "" Let No One Judge You": Col 2: 16-17 in Exegetical Perspective," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 21, no. 1, 212-214; Ron du Preez, "The Sabbata in Colossians 2:16: Reflections on a Debated Text," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 49, no. 2 (2011): 298-300.

referring to the weekly Sabbath. A key advocate is Francis D. Nichol, as he comments, “The type of sabbath under consideration is shown by the phrase ‘which are a shadow of things to come’ (Col. 2:17). The weekly Sabbath is a memorial of an event at the beginning of earth’s history (Gen. 2:2, 3; Ex. 20:8-11; PP 48). Hence, the ‘sabbath days’ Paul declares to be shadows pointing to Christ cannot refer to the weekly Sabbath designated by the fourth commandment.”¹¹ While this paper leans towards the last view, it observes that both sides of the debate often give limited attention to the pastoral implications of Paul’s paraenesis for lay preachers and congregations.

Across more than a decade of pastoral ministry, the researcher has repeatedly encountered many people who challenge the validity of the weekly Sabbath by appealing to Col 2:16, especially during evangelistic meetings. Moreover, in contemporary Ghanaian Christian discourse, debates over the biblical basis of Sabbath observance increasingly extend beyond pulpit and classroom settings into radio-linked social media spaces. For instance, public interaction on Angel FM Kumasi 96.1’s Facebook page shows that some contributors appeal to Pauline texts, especially Colossians 2:16, to frame Sabbath practice as a contested matter of interpretation. Such references, appearing within the broader (often Twi-mediated) conversational ecosystem around religious issues, indicate that Sabbath theology is not only discussed on-air but also negotiated in public commentaries, where participants cite

¹¹ “Sabbath days,” (Col 2:16), *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary (SDAC)*, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002), 7:205, 206; See also Francis W. Beare, “Colossians: Introduction and Exegesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 200.

Scripture to justify or challenge particular positions.¹² The questions at stake are, “What is the meaning of *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16?” In other words, “Does the meaning of *sabbatōn* reflect the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue? How must lay preachers apply this text in their Christian lives and practice? These recurring questions reveal a gap between scholarly discussions of Col 2:16 and the practical concerns of church members and lay preachers in Central Ghana Conference. Much of the literature focuses on theological controversies, yet offers little concrete guidance for those who must teach and apply this text in local congregations. This study seeks to help bridge that gap.

Statement of Problem

The interpretation of the term *sabbatōn* in Colossians is pivotal to Paul’s paraenesis in the letter and to contemporary debates about the Sabbath. However, divergent interpretations of the term *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 continue to shape the life and practice of many churches in conflicting ways. In some settings, Col 2:16 is cited as proof that the weekly Sabbath has been abolished; in others, it is carefully restricted to ceremonial sabbaths so that the weekly Sabbath remains fully binding. Within the Central Ghana Conference, lay preachers must respond to these competing claims in evangelistic campaigns, Bible studies, and pastoral care, often without a clear, context-sensitive exegesis of the passage. The core problem this study addresses is the lack of a historically and textually grounded understanding of *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 that can both clarify Paul’s intent and guide pastoral practice in this specific Ghanaian context. The study therefore impinges on the following

¹² Angel FM Kumasi 96.1, “Breaking News #AbnGhana #AngelNews,” Facebook post, comment referencing Colossians 2:16, <https://www.facebook.com/angelfmkumasi/posts/breaking-news-abnghana-angelnews/1152269192123592/> accessed February 5, 2026.

questions: How do the historical background and literary context support the meaning of the *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16? How should *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 be related to the weekly Sabbath enshrined in the Decalogue? How should Paul's paraenetic teaching on *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 be understood: as functional or normative for Christians throughout history? What pastoral guidance and teaching strategies follow from this exegesis for lay preachers in the Central Ghana Conference?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is fourfold. First, it seeks to determine the meaning of *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 within its historical background and immediate literary context. Second, it examines whether *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 refers to the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue or to other kinds of sacred time. Third, it explores whether Paul's instruction on *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 should be regarded as normative for all Christians or as primarily functional to the Colossian situation. Fourth, the study aims to distil pastoral implications that can inform the teaching and preaching of lay preachers and other leaders in the contemporary church.

Significance of Study

This study is expected to contribute to a more rigorous reading, nuanced understanding, and responsible application of the meaning of *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16. By clarifying Paul's use of *sabbatōn* within its historical and literary contexts, the research will provide lay preachers in the Central Ghana Conference with exegetically grounded interpretations that can inform evangelistic proclamation, Bible-study instruction, and pastoral counselling. The findings will also enrich the wider scholarly discussion on Colossians 2:16 from an African Adventist perspective, drawing attention to the ways in which a specific pastoral context shapes the

questions posed to the text and the reception of its message. Beyond these immediate contexts, ordinary readers who wrestle with the relationship between Sabbath observance and Christian freedom may likewise be aided by the theological and practical insights distilled in this study.

Delimitations

This study focuses primarily on Paul's discourse in Colossians 2:6-23, with particular attention to 2:16, within that larger argument about the sufficiency of Christ and the rejection of ritual criteria for spirituality. It does not attempt a comprehensive biblical theology of the Sabbath across the entire canon. Rather, it confines itself to those Old Testament and New Testament passages that illuminate Paul's language in Col 2:16-17 and are necessary for responsible exegesis of this unit. Because the central research questions arise from the practical challenges facing lay preachers in the Central Ghana Conference, the study also gives sustained attention to the contemporary pastoral setting and to the needs of those who must preach and teach this text in local congregations.

Methodology and Procedure

This study employs a historical-grammatical analysis of Colossians 2:16 and its wider literary context to determine the theological and pastoral significance of *sabbatōn* for lay preachers in the Central Ghana Conference. This approach is appropriate because the research questions centre on what Paul meant by *sabbatōn* in its original setting and how that meaning should norm contemporary practice. A historical-grammatical method allows the study to attend carefully to the language, syntax, and structure of the text, situate the passage within its first-century historical and religious environment, and trace the movement from exegesis to contemporary

application. The approach also resonates with the Adventist commitment to Scripture's authority and with a broad consensus among evangelical scholars who regard historical-grammatical interpretation as a responsible way of reading the Bible in the church. Frank M. Hasel, for example, argues that this method safeguards both the divine origin and the human situatedness of Scripture, enabling interpreters to hear the text in its own voice before drawing theological and pastoral conclusions.¹³

The historical-grammatical method offers several important strengths. First, by focusing on authorial intent and the original audience, it seeks to recover the meaning that the biblical writer intended the first readers to grasp, thereby helping to prevent arbitrary allegorization of the text. Second, it deliberately builds a pathway from exegesis to application: interpreters move from what the text meant in its original context to what it means for the church today, which makes the method pastorally usable. Third, it requires careful attention to the language, genre, and structure of the passage. Fourth, many scholars agree that this approach is compatible with consistent, disciplined Bible study, because it provides shared rules of interpretation that give primacy to the authority of the text.¹⁴ At the same time, the method has limitations.

An inflexible grammatical-historical reading can struggle to account for future-oriented prophetic texts, and the method is sometimes mistakenly equated with a crude "literalism;" properly understood, 'literalism' means reading the text in its plain, grammatical, historical, and contextual sense. In this study, these weaknesses are addressed by reading Colossians 2:16 in close connection with the broader

¹³ Frank M. Hasel, "Recent Trends in Methods of Biblical Interpretation," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Frank M. Hasel (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald Academic, 2020), 459.

¹⁴ Robert L. Thomas, "Current Hermeneutical Trends: Toward Explanation or Obfuscation?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, no. 2 (1996): 244-45.

canonical context, by recognizing the symbolic and typological dimensions of Sabbath language, and by remaining sensitive to the literary and rhetorical features of the epistle rather than reducing the text to bare propositions.

In addition to the historical-grammatical framework, the study conducts grammatical, syntactical, and structural analysis of the passage. The thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter One provides the general introduction, including the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, delimitations, and the methodology and procedures. Chapter Two surveys major scholarly views related to *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16. Chapter Three presents the general historical background of Colossians and offers a grammatical-syntactical and literary analysis of *sabbatōn* within its immediate and larger context. Chapter Four develops the theological implications of the exegesis and articulates practical pastoral implications. Chapter Five summarizes the findings, draws conclusions, and offers recommendations for further study and for pastoral practice.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colossians 2:16-17 stands at the crossroads of several major debates: the relation of law and gospel, the continuity of Israel’s sacred times, the legitimacy of Christian Sabbath observance, and the nature of the “shadow” and “substance” in Christ. Almost every serious treatment of the Sabbath in Christian theology eventually arrives at this text and, in particular, at the term *sabbaton* (*sabbata*) in 2:16. Rick Griffith captures the tone of much evangelical literature when he states that “of all of the statements in the New Testament, these verses most strongly refute the Sabbatarian claim for observance of the Jewish Sabbath.”¹

At the same time, Seventh-day Adventists and some Reformed writers argue that Colossians 2:16 has been misread and that *sabbaton* here does not abolish the weekly Sabbath but refers instead to ceremonial sabbaths or to the sacrificial aspects of Israel’s calendar.² This clash of interpretations means that the exegesis of a single plural noun, *sabbata*, has disproportionate theological and pastoral weight.

The passage itself reads: “Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or in respect to a festival or a new moon or sabbaths” (Col 2:16). The plural, “sabbaths,” raises several questions. Does Paul have in view the weekly seventh-day

¹ Rick J. Griffith, “The Sabbath in Colossians 2:16,” in *The Eschatological Significance of the Sabbath* (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990), 164-71.

² Ron du Preez, “Sabbaths, Annual (Ceremonial),” *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* (November 27, 2021), 68-73; Ronald A. G. du Preez, *A Critical Analysis of the Word Sabbatōn in Colossians 2:16* (PhD diss., University of the Western Cape, 2018).

Sabbath of the Decalogue, the special festal sabbaths of Leviticus 23, the Sabbath together with its sacrificial system, or a more general pattern of ascetic, calendar-based spirituality tied to the “elements of the world” (2:8, 20)?

Paul Giem’s landmark article “Sabbatōn in Col 2:16,” identifies four major options that still largely govern the discussion: (1) *sabbatōn* as weekly Sabbath abrogated; (2) *sabbatōn* as ceremonial or cultic sabbaths only; (3) *sabbatōn* as weekly Sabbath in its sacrificial or ritual dimension; and (4) *sabbatōn* as part of an ascetic-mystical calendar practice.³ Each option has strengths and weaknesses. Views (1) and (4) emphasize the sufficiency of Christ and guard against legalism, yet they risk flattening the Old Testament background into a general rejection of sacred times. Views (2) and (3) take more seriously the variety of “sabbaths” in Israel’s calendar and the sacrificial dimensions of Colossians 2:16-17, but they sometimes struggle to explain why Paul uses the plural *sabbata* without further qualification. The present study evaluates these options in light of the historical-grammatical method, giving particular attention to lexical usage, Old Testament allusions, and the rhetorical flow of Colossians 2:6-23.

Thus, the literature on *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 is not only extensive; it is also deeply shaped by confessional commitments and ecclesial practice. A careful literature review therefore sets out both (a) what the major scholarly voices actually argue and (b) how those arguments are rooted in particular lexical, historical, and theological assumptions. The following sections attempt to do this under several thematic headings.

³ Paul Giem, “Sabbatōn in Col 2:16,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19, no. 3 (1981): 195-210.

Lexical and Semantic Studies of *Sabbatōn*

Basic Lexical Data

Standard lexicons agree that Greek *sabbatōn* is a loanword from the Hebrew *šabbāt*, and that its basic meaning is the seventh-day Sabbath as a day of rest. The third edition of Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich⁴ lists the following major senses: (1) the Sabbath day as the seventh day of the week; (2) “sabbaths” in the plural meaning either multiple Sabbath days or, idiomatically, a single Sabbath; and (3) by extension, a “week.”⁵ Thayer’s older lexicon and TDNT largely echo this, emphasizing that Jewish Greek regularly uses the plural *sabbata* even when a single Sabbath day is in view.⁶

On a straightforward lexical reading, then, *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 most naturally denotes the weekly Sabbath, because this is its dominant sense in the New Testament. Some interpreters therefore conclude that Paul is here relativizing the weekly Sabbath itself, along with the food laws and festival calendar, and that no further investigation is required. Yet even this “obvious” reading raises questions: why does Paul use the plural *sabbata*? how does the expression relate to Old Testament lists of “festival, new moon, and sabbath”? and how do the Colossian opponents incorporate sabbath observance into their programme? These questions show that lexical data alone cannot settle the exegetical issue; they must be integrated with the historical situation and the larger literary context. Precisely at this point, the present study finds its necessity.

⁴ Also referred to as *BDAG*

⁵ Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 909.

⁶ Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889), 565-66.

Lexical “Markers” and Their Limits

Ron du Preez’s dissertation and subsequent publications illustrate one methodological attempt to narrow the meaning of *sabbatōn* in Colossians. He proposes that in the Old Testament and LXX, when the weekly Sabbath as creation ordinance is intended, it tends to appear with certain “markers”: terms like “day,” “holy,” “remember,” or possessive phrases such as “my Sabbaths.” When these markers are absent, the term is more likely to refer to ceremonial sabbaths associated with sacrifices and festivals.⁷ On this basis, du Preez suggests that the bare plural *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 leans toward a ceremonial reference.⁸

This strategy has the virtue of taking contextual usage seriously and resisting simplistic appeals to dictionary glosses. It also rightly insists that *sabbatōn* in the Bible is not a monolithic technical term; its nuance shifts with literary and ritual setting. However, several critiques have been raised. Michael Sokupa notes that many of du Preez’s “markers” are not consistently present even when the weekly Sabbath is clearly in view.⁹ Moreover, in formulaic lists such as “festival, new moon, Sabbaths,” brevity is the norm; it would be unrealistic to expect the full phrase “holy Sabbath day of the LORD” in every occurrence.

A second issue is that du Preez’s approach can appear somewhat circular: passages that support his thesis are foregrounded, while those that do not fit are explained away as exceptions or as belonging to another category. Frey, for example, argues that Jubilees 2 and 6 actually show *sabbata* functioning as a broad calendrical

⁷ Ronald A. G. du Preez, “A Critical Analysis of the Word *Sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16,” 80-87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 155-70.

⁹ Mxolisi Michael Sokupa, “The Calendric Elements in Colossians 2:16 in Light of the Ongoing Debate on the Opponents,” *Neotestamentica* 46, no. 1 (2012): 179-81.

term that includes weekly and non-weekly holy times, and that this complex usage weakens attempts to make a sharp lexical divide between “moral Sabbath” and “ceremonial sabbaths.”¹⁰

In short, lexical work confirms that *sabbatōn* mainly denotes the weekly Sabbath and, by extension, Sabbath observance, although the term can occasionally extend to other rest days associated with Israel’s festal calendar. Lexical studies also show that *sabbatōn* carries strong covenantal and identity-forming overtones: it is not only a time-word but also a marker of Israel’s relationship with God. The literature agrees, however, that purely lexical arguments cannot, by themselves, decide the meaning of *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16. What remains contested is how this lexical range functions in the specific situation addressed in the letter. For that reason, this study moves from lexical analysis to historical background and to a close reading of the Colossian “philosophy” before returning to the exegesis of 2:16-17.

The “Festival-New Moon-Sabbaths” Formula and Calendrical Background Old Testament Parallels

A second major strand of research focuses on the triadic formula in Colossians 2:16: “festival, new moon, Sabbaths” (*heortē, noumēnia, sabbata*). Here the work of Giem has been especially influential. He catalogs Old Testament and LXX passages where similar sequences occur, such as 1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 2:4; 8:13; 31:3; Nehemiah 10:33; Hosea 2:11; and Ezekiel 45:17.¹¹ In most of these, the pattern moves from annual festivals to monthly new moons and finally to weekly Sabbaths, covering the full range of sacred times.

¹⁰ Frey, “*Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths*,” 59-62.

¹¹ Giem, “*Sabbatōn* in Col 2:16,” 199-203.

Giem points out that in 1 Chronicles 23:31 and 2 Chronicles 2:4, this three-fold series is explicitly tied to sacrificial offerings; the daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly sacrifices are presented together as a structured cultic system.¹² By reading Colossians 2:16 against this background, he argues that Paul has in view not merely a few isolated holy days but the entire sacrificial calendar, with *sabbatōn* referring specifically to the weekly Sabbath as an occasion for offerings.¹³

Other scholars have broadly followed this approach. Du Preez builds on Giem's list but expands it to include additional Old Testament, Apocryphal, and Dead Sea Scrolls parallels, concluding that the phrase "festival, new moon, Sabbaths" functions as a "catch-phrase tied to the sacrificial system."¹⁴ Frey, while critical of some of Giem's specific conclusions, likewise argues that the recurring linkage of feasts, new moons, and Sabbaths across the biblical and Second Temple corpora points to an "Old Covenant colloquialism" for Israel's cultic calendar.¹⁵

The strength of this line of argument is its intertextual depth. Very few scholars now think that Paul simply strings together three random religious "events." The triad is almost certainly an echo of Israel's pattern of sacred times. What remains in dispute is whether Colossians 2:16 targets mainly the days themselves, the sacrifices performed on them, or the ways those days functioned socially and spiritually in the Colossian context.

¹² Giem, "Sabbatōn in Col 2:16," 199-203.

¹³ Ibid., 207-9.

¹⁴ Du Preez, "A Critical Analysis of the Word Sabbatōn," 120-30; Frey, "Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths," 49-55.

¹⁵ Frey, "Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths," 47-48.

Second Temple and Qumran Evidence

Recent studies add texture by looking beyond the canonical Old Testament. Frey and Sokupa both emphasize Jubilees 2 and 6, where days, Sabbaths, months, feasts, years, Sabbaths of years, and jubilees are grouped in lists that highlight the ceremonial and calendrical dimensions of these times.¹⁶ Jubilees laments future generations who will “forget the new moons and appointed times and Sabbaths” and thereby upset the entire order of sacred time.¹⁷ This language comes strikingly close to Colossians 2:16 and suggests that, at least in some Jewish circles, “Sabbaths” were considered part of a tightly integrated, ceremonial calendar system.

The Dead Sea Scrolls add another layer. Sokupa highlights the “Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice” and other texts where Sabbaths are associated with particular sacrificial liturgies and angelic worship.¹⁸ He concludes that at Qumran, calendar observance, especially Sabbaths and festivals, was woven into a worldview of heavenly liturgy, covenant exclusivity, and eschatological expectation. This intensifies the sense that when Paul mentions “festival, new moon, Sabbaths,” he is touching something far more charged than a neutral holiday schedule.

These Second Temple parallels have two main implications. First, they confirm that Jewish readers would likely hear Colossians 2:16 in terms of a cultic pattern rather than in generic “religious day” terms. Second, they warn against simplistic dichotomies between “moral weekly Sabbath” and “ceremonial sabbaths,” since the same Sabbath day could be viewed simultaneously as a creation ordinance, a covenant sign, and a ceremonial occasion for sacrifices and special liturgies.

¹⁶ Frey, “Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths,” 59-60.

¹⁷ Jubilees 6:32-38, discussed in Frey, “*Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths*,” 60-62.

¹⁸ Sokupa, “*Calendric Elements in Colossians 2:16*,” 180-83.

Evaluating the Calendrical Approach

The calendrical approach is not without critics. Some scholars worry that Gien and those following him give too much weight to word-lists, risking an over-systematization of texts that are, in their original settings, more ad hoc. For example, in Hosea 2:11 the order is “festival, new moon, Sabbath,” but the emphasis lies on Yahweh’s judgment in taking these away, not on defining a technical triad.

Moreover, as Frey points out, the assumption that Numbers 28-29 is the primary background for Colossians 2:16 may be too narrow. Jubilees and other writings show that the combination of feasts, new moons, and Sabbaths became a flexible marker of sacred time more generally, not exclusively a sacrificial code.¹⁹ Still, even critics tend to concede that Colossians 2:16 echoes an established calendrical formula. The disagreement is over how tightly that echo binds Paul’s meaning. This tension opens the door for the different interpretive options surveyed below.

The Colossian “Philosophy,” Ritual Practice, and the Function of Sacred Times

How one reads *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 depends heavily on how one reconstructs the Colossian “philosophy” (2:8) and its pressures on the church. Three broad models dominate the literature: (1) a primarily Jewish covenant-marking pattern; (2) a syncretistic mix of Jewish, pagan, and ascetic elements; and (3) a more generalized ascetic-mystical spirituality that co-opts Jewish practices.²⁰ Each

¹⁹ Frey, “Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths,” 60-63.

²⁰ See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 175-77; Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon, Word Biblical Commentary* 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 139-42; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 217-23; Pitts, “Removing an Arrow from the Supersessionist Quiver,” 130-45.

reconstruction highlights different aspects of the opponents and leads to different expectations about the role of sacred times in the controversy. The lexical and semantic analysis of *sabbatōn* must therefore be held together with an historically responsible account of the “philosophy” confronting the Colossian believers.

Jewish Covenant Identity and Boundary-Markers

James D. G. Dunn is the most influential advocate of the first model. He argues that the key issue in Colossians is not an early “gnostic” heresy but a Jewish covenant identity movement that resisted Gentile inclusion.²¹ The “philosophy” in 2:8 is thus best understood as a Jewish-colored worldview that insists on circumcision, food laws, and calendar observance as markers of belonging to the people of God. In this setting, Sabbath observance functions as a central covenant badge, and the problem with those “judging” the Colossians (2:16) is that they demand full compliance with Jewish law as the condition of being “truly” God’s people.

Dunn underscores that the Sabbath in question is “not simply ceremonial, but the Sabbath as a Jewish institution in all its covenant distinctiveness.”²² That is, he sees Paul’s critique as aimed squarely at Sabbath as social boundary between Jew and Gentile, not just at sacrificial practices performed on that day. This reconstruction fits well with broader patterns in Paul, particularly in Galatians and Romans, where circumcision, food, and days often appear as boundary markers. It also helps explain why Colossians repeatedly stresses fullness in Christ for Gentile believers (1:27-28; 2:9-10) and warns against “anyone” who would draw them back into slavery under the *stoicheia* (2:8, 20).

²¹ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 23-27, 175-77.

²² *Ibid.*, 175.

The main limitation of Dunn's model is that it struggles to fully account for the mystical and ascetic features in 2:18-23: angel-worship, visions, "severity to the body," and "self-made religion." Dunn suggests that these can still be integrated within a kind of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism. However, critics argue that his model may flatten the variety of influences in the Lycus Valley and underplay the syncretistic flavor of the region.²³

Syncretistic Asceticism and Mystical Piety

A second major model, associated especially with Peter T. O'Brien, Douglas J. Moo, and Clinton E. Arnold, understands the Colossian problem as a syncretistic programme that combines Jewish and pagan elements. On this view, local folk-beliefs about hostile spirits and cosmic "powers" are blended with Jewish practices such as circumcision, food laws, and observance of sacred days. The result is an ascetic-mystical regimen that promises spiritual protection and visionary experiences to those who submit to its rules. Calendar observances and dietary regulations, in this model, are not simply covenantal markers but part of a wider strategy of self-denial and ritual control. This reconstruction explains well Paul's language about "worship of angels," "self-abasement," and "regulations" (2:18, 21-23), but it runs the risk of under-emphasizing the distinctly Jewish scriptural roots of the triad "festival, new moon, and sabbaths."

Moo, emphasizes that the combination of food and drink, festival, new moon, and Sabbaths, plus the ascetic "do not handle, do not taste, do not touch," fits an environment where religious specialists prescribe ritual practices as means of spiritual

²³ Stephen J. Wellum, "Colossians," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 17, no. 3 (2013): 10-13.

advancement.²⁴ The problem, then, is not simply the presence of Jewish elements but their use in a system that marginalizes Christ's sufficiency. This model accounts well for the breadth of issues in 2:16-23 and resonates with what we know of religious pluralism in Phrygia and the broader Greco-Roman world. Its weakness, however, is that it can make the Jewish components appear secondary or incidental. Jewish readers, especially, may feel that such reconstructions turn Torah practices into mere "raw material" for syncretism and thus miss their own inner logic and value.

More Recent Post-Supersessions Proposals

A third, more recent line in the literature comes from post-supersessionist readings of Paul. "Post-supersessionist" theology rejects the idea that the church has simply replaced Israel and instead emphasises God's continuing covenant with the Jewish people.²⁵ Andrew Pitts, a key proponent, argues that traditional interpretations have often assumed that Colossians 2:16-17 is anti-Jewish law, thereby supporting supersessionist theology. He challenges the assumption that Col 2:16-17 is against the law by suggesting that Paul may be defending Gentile believers who observe certain Jewish practices in a Christ-centred way against critics who insist on a more rigorous or Torah-exclusive pattern.²⁶ On this reading, "let no one judge you" might mean "do not let anyone condemn you in how you observe these times," whether you keep them or not, rather than a blanket prohibition of observance itself. The "shadow" language in 2:17 would then critique the misuse of sacred times, not the times themselves.

²⁴ Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 220-23.

²⁵ R. Kendall Soulen, "Post-Supersessionism," in *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 350-51.

²⁶ Pitts, "Removing an Arrow from the Supersessionist Quiver," 130-45.

These proposals are still relatively new and remain controversial. Critics question whether the Greek grammar and rhetorical flow support such a nuanced reading, and whether the text gives enough hints that Paul is affirming any calendar observance at all. Yet this trajectory is important because it re-opens the possibility that Paul’s quarrel is with judgmentalism and spiritual elitism, not simply with Jewish days as such.

In sum, the literature on the Colossian “philosophy” provides three different lenses through which *sabbaton* in 2:16 can be seen: (1) a covenant-boundary marker now relativised in Christ; (2) part of a syncretistic ascetic system; or (3) as a contested but still valued Jewish practice within a non-supersessionist framework. Each lens will colour how *sabbatōn* is understood. If the first lens is adopted, *sabbata* will be read alongside circumcision and food laws as identity-markers that can no longer be used to judge Christian faithfulness. If the second lens dominates, *sabbata* will appear as one element among many in a spiritual regimen that promises protection or higher experience but actually undermines Christ’s sufficiency. If the third lens is preferred, *sabbata* may be seen as a legitimate practice for some believers, so long as it is not turned into a criterion of salvation or spiritual status. This study acknowledges insights from each model but proceeds on the assumption that Paul is primarily warning the Colossians against allowing any ritual observance, whether Jewish or syncretistic, to become a basis for judgment, while simultaneously drawing heavily on Israel’s scriptural calendar to make his point.

Major Interpretive Options for Sabbatōn in Colossians 2:16 Sabbatōn as the Weekly Seventh-Day Sabbath Abrogated

The most common view in mainstream evangelical scholarship is that *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 refers to the weekly seventh-day Sabbath, and that Paul

is undermining any claim that keeping that day is binding on Christians. F. F. Bruce states that the triad “festival, new moon, Sabbaths,” “is a conventional way of summarising the Jewish celebration of sacred times,” clearly including the weekly Sabbath. Bruce, therefore, concludes that Paul forbids anyone to impose such observances on believers as conditions of acceptance.²⁷

Douglas Moo similarly argues that the phrase “can validly be used...to conclude that the observance of a Sabbath day is no longer a requirement of God’s people in the new realm.”²⁸ For Moo, the “shadow” metaphor in 2:17 indicates that the Sabbath, like other Old Testament rituals, finds its fulfilment in Christ, particularly in his completed work and the rest he provides. Christians may still choose to observe a weekly day of rest, but it is not a legal requirement.

Popular evangelical expositors, drawing on such commentaries, often present Colossians 2:16 as a decisive text against Sabbatarianism. Griffith’s study materials, used widely in teaching, explicitly claim that these verses “expressly forbid” the observance of the Jewish Sabbath as binding on Christians.²⁹ This reading has several strengths. It fits the surface sense of the festival/new moon/Sabbaths triad in Old Testament parallels, where the Sabbath is clearly the weekly seventh day. It coheres with Paul’s other statements where special days appear relativized (e.g., Rom 14:5-6; Gal 4:10-11). And it aligns with broader Protestant theology that sees the Mosaic law, as a covenant code, fulfilled and transcended in Christ.

²⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 114-15.

²⁸ Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 222.

²⁹ Griffith, “*Sabbath in Colossians 2:16*,” 164-65.

Critics, however, raise two main concerns. First, they note that Paul does not list the Ten Commandments and then single out the fourth; instead, he rebukes ritual observances that function as grounds for judgment and spiritual elitism. Adventist scholar Samuele Bacchiocchi argues that the “shadow” language of Colossians 2:17 is more naturally applied to sacrificial rites than to a creation institution like the seventh-day rest.³⁰ Second, some worry that this interpretation can feed supersessionist patterns, where Jewish practices are portrayed only as abolished burdens rather than as gifts that find new significance in Christ.

***Sabbatōn* as Ceremonial or Cultic Sabbaths Only**

In reaction to the abrogation view, another tradition argues that *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 refers not to the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue, but to ceremonial sabbaths associated with Israel’s festivals and sacrificial system. This interpretation is especially strong among Seventh-day Adventist scholars. Early Adventist writers like Carlyle Haynes and M. L. Andreasen distinguished between the moral law (Ten Commandments, including the weekly Sabbath) and ceremonial laws (annual feasts, sabbatical years), insisting that Colossians 2:16 concerns only the latter.³¹

Bacchiocchi develops this line historically and exegetically. He argues that in the New Testament, the Sabbaths in Colossians 2:16-17 belong to the system of “shadow-ordinances” pointing forward to Christ’s sacrifice and priestly work, not to the weekly Sabbath established at creation.³² He notes that the Old Testament

³⁰ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *The Sabbath in the New Testament* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1985), 101-18.

³¹ Carlyle B. Haynes, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1928), 28-30; M. L. Andreasen, *The Sabbath* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1942), 213-17.

³² Bacchiocchi, *The Sabbath in the New Testament*, 112-18.

sometimes uses “Sabbath” for non-weekly rest days (e.g., the Day of Atonement), and that the plural *sabbatōn* in certain contexts can point to this broader category.³³

Recent institutional Adventist publications and du Preez’s doctoral work reinforce this reading. The Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists article on “Annual (Ceremonial) Sabbaths” concludes that “the compelling weight of linguistic, intertextual, and contextual evidence” identifies the Sabbaths of Colossians 2:16 as annual ceremonial sabbaths, not the weekly Sabbath.³⁴ Du Preez’s dissertation is frequently cited as supplying the detailed lexical and structural argument for this position.³⁵ The advantages of this view are clear: it preserves the creation-based, moral character of the weekly Sabbath while acknowledging that certain sabbath-like days tied to sacrifices have been fulfilled and set aside. It also resonates with long-standing Christian distinctions between “moral” and “ceremonial” law.

Still, from a critical perspective, this interpretation faces serious challenges. The Old Testament and Second Temple evidence surveyed above suggests that when “festival, new moon, Sabbaths” appears, “Sabbaths” almost always includes the weekly Sabbath as a climax of the triad, even while it can carry ceremonial overtones. Giem explicitly argues that attempts to limit the term in Colossians 2:16 to annual sabbaths “erode the summary nature of the formula” and lack solid precedent.³⁶ Moreover, as non-Adventist reviewers have noted, du Preez himself acknowledges

³³ Bacchiocchi, *The Sabbath in the New Testament*, 116-17.

³⁴ Du Preez, “*Sabbaths, Annual (Ceremonial)*,” 70-73.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 72-73; du Preez, “*A Critical Analysis of the Word Sabbatōn*,” abstract and 155-70.

³⁶ Giem, “*Sabbatōn in Col 2:16*,” 207-10; Frey, “*Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths*,” 60-63.

how rare it is to assign a purely “ceremonial Sabbaths only” sense to *sabbatōn* in the New Testament.³⁷

***Sabbatōn* as Weekly Sabbath in Its Sacrificial/Ritual Dimension**

Giem’s own position offers a nuanced middle way. He maintains that *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 refer to the weekly Sabbath, but that the phrase “festival, new moon, Sabbaths” evokes the entire sacrificial system of Israel’s calendar.³⁸ Thus, what is being declared “shadow” in 2:17 is not “time” as such, nor the bare existence of a seventh-day rest, but the complex of offerings, rituals, and cultic obligations bound to those times. One of Giem’s most creative contributions is his suggestion that the triad in 2:16 may have functioned as a slogan used by the Colossian opponents themselves, a “catch-phrase” representing their devotion to the full sacrificial calendar.³⁹ Paul then takes up their own slogan and reframes it christologically: the “shadow” aspects of those observances have been fulfilled in Christ, who is the “body” or reality. This reading successfully holds together several strands of the evidence. It respects the Old Testament background of the triad, takes seriously the sacrificial and ceremonial dimensions highlighted at Qumran and in Jubilees, and yet does not require the weekly Sabbath to vanish entirely from Christian theology. Indeed, Giem’s view has been used by some Reformed writers to support a distinction between a moral “Sabbath principle” and the ceremonial trappings that have passed away.⁴⁰

³⁷ E. E. Reynolds, “Judging the Sabbath: Discovering What Can’t Be Found in Colossians 2:16,” *Themelios* 35, no. 1 (2010): 41-42.

³⁸ Giem, “*Sabbatōn in Col 2:16*,” 205-9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 197-99; see also Frey, “*Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths*,” 48-50.

⁴⁰ Frey, “*Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths*,” 48-52.

The main critique of this position is that it can appear ambiguous in application. If the weekly Sabbath is included among the “shadows,” even if only in its sacrificial aspect, what does this mean for Christian practice? Should the church still set apart the seventh day, or any day, as a creational rest? Gien leaves these questions largely open, and later writers who build on his work sometimes press his conclusions in different directions, some in a more Sabbatarian, others in a more anti-Sabbatarian direction.

***Sabbatōn* in an Ascetic-Mystical Calendar System**

A fourth trajectory emphasises the ascetic and mystical elements surrounding Colossians 2:16. Jerry Sumney, David Garland, and others note that the same section of the letter warns against worship of angels, visionary experiences, and harsh treatment of the body (2:18-23).⁴¹ In this setting, Sabbaths may have been used as privileged times for visionary ascent or for securing protection from hostile powers. From this angle, Paul’s concern is less about which sabbaths are in view and more about how they are being used. *Sabbatōn* names any sacred time that the opponents have turned into a tool of spiritual one-upmanship. The “judging” in 2:16 then refers to a system where certain believers claim superior spirituality because they observe particular days in particular ways. Some modern writers in popular and semi-academic venues build on this to argue that Colossians 2:16 provides a general warning against legalistic or magical use of religious calendars, whether Jewish or

⁴¹ Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 139-44; David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 174-75.

Christian. They see the text as undermining any attempt to turn Sabbath observance, of whatever kind, into a badge of spiritual elitism.⁴²

The strength of this approach is that it connects 2:16 organically with 2:18-23. It then situates the text within a live spirituality of the first century, where days and diets were bound up with fears, hopes, and cosmic anxieties. Its weakness is that, if pressed too far, it can abstract *sabbatōn* from its Jewish covenantal roots, making it sound like just another ascetic technique rather than a command that had carried profound historical and theological meaning for Israel.

Theological and Hermeneutical Trajectories

The exegetical options above flow out into larger theological trajectories. The literature on Colossians 2:16-17 often shifts quickly from detailed parsing of *sabbatōn* to broad claims about law, covenant, Sabbath, and Christian identity.

Sabbath as Shadow and Christ as Substance

A dominant Reformed and evangelical reading sees Colossians 2:17 and Hebrews 4 together as teaching that the Sabbath is typological. The weekly rest, in this view, prefigured the eschatological rest and the Christ-centred rest that believers now enjoy. Writers such as Moo and Tony Costa argue that clinging to the seventh-day Sabbath as a binding ordinance risks holding onto the shadow when the substance has arrived.⁴³

⁴² Griffith, "Sabbath in Colossians 2:16," 164-71; "A Gift, Not a Burden," *Impactus devotional*, July 22, 2021.

⁴³ Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 222; Tony Costa, "The Sabbath and Its Relation to Christ and the Church in the New Covenant," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (2016): 127-43.

Some, however, preserve a Christian Sabbath theology by transferring sabbath obligation to the first day of the week. They often appeal to the Puritan tradition, which tended to interpret “feasts, new moons, and Sabbaths” in Colossians 2:16 as references to ceremonies of the Mosaic economy while maintaining the “moral” obligation of one day in seven for rest and worship.⁴⁴ In that frame, Colossians 2:16 abolishes the Jewish form of Sabbath but not the creation-rooted pattern of sabbatical rhythm.

Adventist and some Orthodox theologians, by contrast, argue that the Sabbath cannot be simply reduced to a shadow function. Bacchiocchi insists that a day can be both a memorial (pointing back to creation and redemption) and a symbol (pointing forward to eschatological rest) without ceasing to have present ethical force.⁴⁵ From this standpoint, Colossians 2:16-17 may be targeting the sacrificial and ceremonial aspects of festival Sabbaths, while the creation Sabbath remains a valid gift and command.

Law, Covenant, and Supersessionism

Another theological issue is the role of Colossians 2:16-17 in supersessionist theology. “Supersessionism” is the view that the Christian church has completely replaced Israel in God’s purposes, so that the Mosaic law and Israel’s institutions, Sabbath, festivals, and other sacred times, are now obsolete religious burdens.⁴⁶ Older Protestant polemics often cited Col 2:16-17 as evidence that the Mosaic law has been

⁴⁴ Frey, “*Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths*,” 47-52.

⁴⁵ Bacchiocchi, *The Sabbath in the New Testament*, 112-18; Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), 339-69.

⁴⁶ Terrence L. Donaldson, “Supersessionism and Early Christian Self-Definition,” *Journal of the Jesus Movement in Its Jewish Setting* 3 (2016): 1-26; R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 29-31.

abrogated and replaced by a new Christian ethic. In such readings, Sabbath and other sacred times are portrayed as obsolete religious burdens.

Post-supersessionist scholars like Pitts question this use of the text. He argues that removing Sabbath and festivals from Christian life altogether can unintentionally support negative views of Judaism and erase the Jewish identity of the early church.⁴⁷ Instead, he suggests that Colossians 2:16 may be read as reconfiguring the significance of these times in Christ rather than annihilating them, and as challenging judgmental attitudes rather than observance per se. This debate is still unfolding, but it shows that the interpretation of *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 carries implications not only for intra-Christian Sabbath debates but also for Christian-Jewish relations and broader questions about the permanence or transformation of Israel's gifts.

Contemporary Christian Practice

Finally, the literature reveals how deeply Colossians 2:16 has shaped practical Christian attitudes toward Sabbath-observance. For some pastors and devotional writers, the passage functions as a gracious release: believers are urged not to let anyone make them feel second-class for not keeping a particular day.⁴⁸ For others, especially in Sabbatarian communities, it is a text that must be carefully re-interpreted so that it does not undermine the joyful observance of the Sabbath as a “palace in time.”⁴⁹ This practical dimension means that scholarly arguments about *sabbatōn* do not remain confined to the academy. They shape liturgy, community expectations, and even personal spirituality. A responsible dissertation will therefore not only map the

⁴⁷ Pitts, “*Removing an Arrow from the Supersessionist Quiver*,” 127-51.

⁴⁸ “A Gift, Not a Burden,” *Impactus*, July 22, 2021.

⁴⁹ Du Preez, “*Sabbaths, Annual (Ceremonial)*,” 76-78.

scholarly positions but also be aware of how those positions filter down into church life.

Summary

The literature on *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 is both rich and contested. Several points of consensus and several ongoing tensions emerge. Areas of broad agreement include: 1. Lexical consensus that *sabbatōn* normally refers to the Sabbath, often the weekly seventh day, though it can also denote “week” or, in some contexts, special sabbath-like days.⁵⁰ 2. Recognition that the festival-new moon-Sabbaths formula draws on a well-established Old Testament and Second Temple pattern covering the full range of Israel’s sacred times.⁵¹ 3. Agreement that Colossians 2:16-23 addresses more than simple legalism; the passage engages a complex mix of identity-marker practices, ascetic disciplines, and mystical experiences.⁵²

Areas of major debate include: 1. Whether *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 refers narrowly to ceremonial sabbaths, broadly to the weekly Sabbath in its sacrificial function, or simply to Sabbath observance as such, including its covenantal and creation aspects.⁵³ 2. How the shadow/substance metaphor should be applied: Is Sabbath primarily a provisional type fulfilled in Christ, or does it retain a distinct,

⁵⁰ Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 909; *TDNT* 7:1-20.

⁵¹ Giem, “*Sabbatōn in Col 2:16*,” 199-203; Frey, “*Feasts, New Moons, and Sabbaths*,” 47-55.

⁵² Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 175-77; Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 217-23

⁵³ Giem, “*Sabbatōn in Col 2:16*,” 205-10; du Preez, “*A Critical Analysis of the Word Sabbatōn*,” 155-70; Bacchiocchi, *The Sabbath in the New Testament*, 101-18.

ongoing significance? 3. Whether Paul's concern is the observance of sacred times itself or the judgment and spiritual elitism attached to such observance.⁵⁴

These debates reveal several research gaps that begs for further studies: First, while du Preez, Giem, and Frey have each contributed significantly, there is room for a fresh, corpus-based semantic study of *sabbatōn* and its cognates across the LXX, Second Temple literature, and early Christian writings, attending carefully to both temporal and ritual dimensions. Second, most studies treat the festival, new moon, Sabbaths formula primarily as a proof-text in the Sabbath debate. A more comprehensive analysis of this formula across Jewish sources could clarify whether its primary focus is on days, sacrifices, calendrical identity, or some combination thereof. Third, post-supersessionist readings are only beginning to explore how Colossians 2:16-17 might be read in a way that honors the Jewish roots of sacred time while still affirming the centrality of Christ. There is space here for a carefully argued proposal that is both exegetically rigorous and theologically sensitive. Finally, there is need for work that brings together lexical, historical, and theological strands into a coherent account of *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 that speaks not only to academic debates but also to the pastoral questions believers actually ask about Sabbath and Christian freedom.

⁵⁴ Pitts, "Removing an Arrow from the Supersessionist Quiver," 130-45; Sumney, *Colossians*, 139-44.

CHAPTER 3

EXEGESIS OF COLOSSIANS 2:16

Brief Introduction to the Intent of the Chapter

This chapter conducts exegetical analysis of *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16. It takes into consideration the general historical background of the book; historical settings which involve the historical context; and literary context, contextual analysis factoring limit of the passage, the structure; structure of the text in its larger and immediate context; lexical and syntactical analysis; word study; inter-textual analysis, and summary.

General Historical Background of the Book

This section provides a general historical background of the book of Colossians. It focuses on the historical settings, which involve the historical context and literary context of Colossians 2:16.

Historical Context

The section seeks to identify the author, the date of writing of the book, the audience and place of writing, the historical-cultural setting, and the significance of background for Col 2:16.

Authorship

Colossians opens by naming “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus,” together with Timothy, as the senders (1:1), and the Christian tradition has long received it as part

of the Pauline corpus.¹ At the same time, modern scholarship has raised questions about its authenticity on stylistic and theological grounds. Some argue that a close Pauline associate (perhaps Timothy) composed the letter in Paul's name, while others defend Pauline authorship, possibly with significant use of an amanuensis.² David E. Aune observes that the authenticity of both Colossians and 2 Thessalonians has been questioned in modern scholarship. However, he also notes that by around A.D. 100, these letters were already included within a ten-letter Pauline corpus, indicating their early and widespread reception in the emerging Christian canon.³ This study proceeds on the working assumption that Colossians is genuinely Pauline (with Timothy's collaboration), not because the debates are insignificant, but because the letter's self-presentation and earliest reception situate it firmly within the apostolic voice that shaped Gentile Christianity.⁴

Date

Most commentators date Colossians to the early 60s C.E., during a period of imprisonment that is often located in Rome (cf. Acts 28:16-31; Col 4:3, 10, 18).⁵ James D. G. Dunn argues that the absence of any reference to the earthquake that "almost destroyed" Colossae in A.D. 60/61 suggests a date shortly before that

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 610-11.

² Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 611-17; James D. G. Dunn, "Introduction to Colossians," in *Bible Month 2019: Colossians* (London: Methodist Church, 2019), 2-3.

³ David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 180.

⁴ Dunn, "Introduction to Colossians," 2-3.

⁵ Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 611-12.

disaster, early in Paul's Roman house arrest.⁶ In that setting, the letter takes on an urgent tone: even while under constraint, Paul expends emotional and theological energy on a relatively small community he may never have visited in person (cf. Col 2:1), because he discerns that the issues at stake touch the very heart of the gospel and the identity of the people of God.⁷

Audience and Provenance

Colossae itself was a modest town in the Lycus valley of western Asia Minor, located on or near one of the main east-west routes connecting the Anatolian interior with Ephesus.⁸ This position on a trade corridor brought together Phrygian locals, Greeks, and a substantial Jewish population, along with a mixture of religious influences: traditional Phrygian cults and folk religion, Hellenistic mystery religions, imperial ideology, and synagogue Judaism.⁹ The Christian community seems to have arisen in the second half of the 50s C.E., probably through the ministry of Epaphras rather than Paul himself (Col 1:7; 4:12-13), with Philemon and Onesimus also linked to the city (cf. Phlm 10-16; Col 4:9).¹⁰ Several passages suggest that the congregation was predominantly Gentile, even if Jews formed a significant minority (1:21, 27; 2:13; 3:11; 4:11).¹¹ Dunn summarizes this by saying that Colossians gives “one of

⁶ Dunn, “Introduction to Colossians,” 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2; cf. Douglas J. Moo, “Colossians,” in *Introduction and Colossians* (Bible Month resource), 2.

⁹ Dunn, “Introduction to Colossians,” 2-3; Clinton E. Arnold, “The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae,” *WUNT 2/77* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1995), 195-200.

¹⁰ Dunn, “Introduction to Colossians,” 2-3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2; cf. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 612.

the clearest indications of a church composed of Jews and Gentiles,” in which Gentiles now share privileges once associated primarily with Israel.¹²

Historical-Cultural Setting

The letter was provoked by troubling reports that reached Paul through Epaphras and possibly Onesimus (Col 1:7-8; 4:9). Dunn depicts a situation in which advocates of an older, established “philosophy” presented their way as spiritually superior to the Colossians’ new life in Christ, criticizing their practice and “passing judgment” on their observance of “rituals and festivals.” In Dunn’s words, such teachers behaved, “as though they themselves were umpires with the authority ... to ‘disqualify’ the Christian belief and practice.”¹³ The warning section in 2:8-23 points to a complex blend: claims to special “wisdom” and “knowledge” (1:9, 28; 2:3, 23), concern with cosmic “elements” and powers (2:8, 15, 20), ascetic treatment of the body (2:21-23), visionary experiences linked with angels (2:18), and strong pressure to adopt specific food laws and sacred times, “festival, new moon, sabbaths” (2:16). Clinton E. Arnold argues that Paul is confronting a local syncretism, in which Jewish Torah observance, magical and folk practices, and concern for protection from hostile spiritual powers had fused into a persuasive but distorted “philosophy.”¹⁴

Paul’s admonition in Colossians 2:16, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or concerning a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,” is not a general essay on sacred time but a focused pastoral response to concrete pressures within a mixed Jewish, Gentile congregation in Roman Asia. The

¹² Dunn, “Introduction to Colossians,” 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁴ Arnold, *Colossian Syncretism*, 195-214, esp. 210, 214.

false teachers employed dietary rules, calendar observances, and ascetic discipline as boundary markers and as purported means of attaining “fullness.”¹⁵ Paul answers by re-centering everything on Christ: because the Colossians died and were raised with him (2:11-15; 3:1-4), such practices are “a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (2:17). Far from encouraging spiritual laxity, this perspective guards the community from allowing humanly devised criteria to usurp Christ’s sufficiency and lordship.¹⁶

Significance of Background for Colossians 2:16

Authorship and early reception sharpen the significance of this context for the present study. Aune notes that, even where the authenticity of “Colossians and 2 Thessalonians” is in doubt, they already appear within an early ten-letter Pauline corpus.¹⁷ Dunn likewise observes a “roughly even split among critical commentators on Colossians and 2 Thessalonians,” while himself regarding Colossians as probably written by Timothy before Paul’s death and firmly within the Pauline tradition.¹⁸ Together, these observations indicate that the early church understood Colossians letter as a faithful articulation of the apostolic gospel. For this study, the historical-cultural setting, the likely Pauline (or Pauline-circle) authorship, and the mixed but predominantly Gentile audience all inform the exegesis of *sabbatōn* in 2:16. Paul is not primarily attacking the Sabbath in the abstract; he is resisting a pattern of teaching

¹⁵ Arnold, *Colossian Syncretism*, 198-214.

¹⁶ Dunn, “Introduction to Colossians,” 2-3.

¹⁷ Aune, *New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, 180.

¹⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 13.

that weaponizes food laws and calendar observance in ways that obscure Christ's sufficiency and fracture the unity of Jew and Gentile in the one body of Christ.¹⁹

Literary Context

Genre of Colossians 2:16

Paul uses *epistole* 'epistle' (4:16), and this indicates the genre of the book as an epistle. Epistle is a written message.²⁰ Epistles are primarily written, sometimes as a response, to deal with specific circumstances.²¹ Paul also uses the verb *krinō* (2:16), "judge," in the imperative to indicate a command to his addressees. The epistolary form and the judicial language together demonstrate that Paul is addressing concrete communal tensions rather than making abstract theological speculation. Generally, Col. 2:16 can be understood as an epistle written by Paul, commanding his addressees to be cautious of people who judge them.

Structure

Many biblical scholars posit that there are chiasmic structures in Colossians.²² Thompson's chiasmic structure (inverted parallelism) of Colossians 2:6-19 is considered to provide a clearer comprehension of the progression of Paul's thought.²³ Thompson's chiasmic structure is illustrated below;

¹⁹ Dunn, "Introduction to Colossians," 2-3; Arnold, *Colossian Syncretism*, 210-14.

²⁰ Fleming H. Revell, "Epistle," *The Revell Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MA: Baker, 1994), 345.

²¹ See also, W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White Jr., "Epistle," *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 204.

²² See, for example, Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 115; Ekkehardt Mueller, "Focus on Scripture: The Firstborn (Col 1:15)," *Reflections: A BRI Newsletter*, October 2005, 7.

²³ Ian H. Thomson, "Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series 111 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 152.

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**”

F! 2:13 “**Dead** in your transgressions. He made you **alive** together with Him”

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”

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”²⁴

Du Perez, in addition, comes up with a simple conceptual chiasm based on the three terms in Colossians 2:16 - “feast, new moon, sabbath.” He diagrams the singular nouns as follows:

A “festival” = three annual pilgrimage feasts

B “new moon” = regular lunar monthly celebrations

A’ “sabbath” =two annual ceremonial sabbaths²⁵

²⁴ Thomson, “Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters,” 152.

²⁵ Ron du Preez, *The Sabbata of Colossians 2:16: Reflections on a Debated Text*, (Andrews University Seminary Studies 49, no. 2 2011), 297.

According to Du Preez, the New Testament Greek term for “feast” “is a restricted word, referring to the three great annual festivals” - Passover/Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. *Sabbata*, in the meantime, can include the other non-pilgrimage annual observances of Trumpets, and Atonement.”²⁶ He then explains the significance of the “new moon.” He finds its central position as a determiner of 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 echo of A, it indicates that the *sabbata* are also to be calculated by means of the new moon.”²⁷ In this case, it becomes erroneous to assume that the seventh-day sabbath is meant in Colossians 2:16 since it was never determined by any lunar calculations. However, the ceremonial sabbath was computed using the lunar. For that matter, the central position of the new moon in the above chiasm of passage could refer to only ceremonial sabbaths, and not the weekly Sabbath.

Contextual Analysis

This section considers the background study and the grammatical-syntactical analysis of Col 2:16. It undertakes a contextual reading of Col 2:16 by situating the verse within the flow of Paul’s argument of 2:6-23, and in the wider epistolary structure of Colossians. It considers both the historical background features outlined and the immediate literary and grammatical-syntactical environment of the verse, with particular attention to how key terms and motifs are developed across the unit. In this way, the contextual analysis seeks to clarify not only what Paul says in 2:16, but how and why he says it at this precise point in the argument. The importance of this

²⁶ du Preez, *The Sabbata of Colossians 2:16*, 197.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

contextual work lies in the fact that it provides the necessary controls for any responsible exegesis of *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 and guards the study from imposing later theological debates back onto the text.

Limit of the Passage

Col 2:16 falls within 2:6-23, where the sufficiency of Christ and the warning against heretical teachings are stressed. Verses 6-23 are preceded by the author's struggles, concern, and purpose for the church (1:24-2:5), and followed by the principles for holy living (3:1-17). The Greek transitional conjunction *oun* "then"²⁸ is used in 2:6 to link the preceding verses (vv. 1:24-2:5). In 3:1, the use of the same transitional conjunction *oun* "then" demonstrates the author's intention to establish another point. Col 2:6-23 is therefore marked as a literary unit by these literary markers used in 2:6 and 3:1. Therefore, Colossians 2:16 may be interpreted in view of this unit.

The Structure of the Text in Its Larger and Immediate Context

A careful reading of Colossians 2:16 requires situating the verse within both the larger argument and the immediate literary context surrounding it. Paul's paraenesis in this section develops a coherent theological flow: from the believers' union with Christ (2:6-7), to the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ over all cosmic powers (2:8-15), to the practical implications of that sufficiency for life within the community (2:16-23). Understanding this movement is essential for discerning how *sabbatōn* functions in verse 16.

²⁸ See also Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2000), 293.

When Paul heard of the faith of the Colossae church in Christ (1:4, 9), he wrote to them expressing his concern through prayer for them (vv. 9, 10). He then established the supremacy of Christ in all things (vv. 15-23). The author goes on to affirm his apostleship and to his audience (v. 25). He further lets his addressees know his purpose for them: that their hearts may be encouraged and they may be united in love (2:2). Paul then begins to command them by cautioning them against deceptive philosophies rooted in human tradition and the fundamental principles of the world (2:8). In exhorting them, Christ's supremacy is reemphasized (vv. 9, 10) and His redemptive plan through baptism which also symbolizes circumcision and the cancellation of the regulations which were against us on the cross (v. 9) are echoed. Paul then draws the attention of his readers to their full integration into the "body of Christ," which is the church (1:8), through baptism (2:11-15). This baptism symbolized "putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ," which was "made without hands" (v. 11). Through baptism, they also experienced the burial and resurrection of Christ "through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (v. 12). Therefore, the Gentiles (1:27)²⁹ are now "alive together with Him" and have experienced the forgiveness of their trespasses, and are no more "dead" in their "trespasses and the uncircumcision of" their "flesh" (v.13).

The inclusion of Gentiles into the family of faith and the gaining of forgiveness and acceptance became a reality through the death of Christ on the cross. In this act, Christ, "wiped out the handwriting of the requirements that was against us, which was against us" (v. 14). When Paul refers to the "wiped out the handwriting of

²⁹ See also Ephesians 2:11-19, a parallel passage indicating gentiles were being referred to.

the requirements that was against us, which was against us,” he is alluding to the Mosaic code which distinguished between God’s covenant people, who were deemed ritually holy and clean so long as they kept the ritual law, and the Gentiles, who were viewed unholy and unclean for not adhering to the ritual law. This distinction prevented the latter from congregating and worshipping with the former at the Sanctuary.

Christ’s forgiveness was made available to the Gentiles when He died on the cross. The death on the cross has therefore “disarmed principalities and powers,” where “He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (v. 15). The principalities and powers referenced here are the same as those referenced in Ephesians 6:12, which denotes the evil forces that govern this present age and are in opposition to God and His people. Through His victory over them on the cross, Christ gained the authority and rulership to lead captives in His triumphant procession, claiming spoils from the enemy.³⁰

Paul then concludes by commanding his addressees not to allow themselves to be judged concerning food or drink or in respect to a festival, new moon, or Sabbath days (v. 16). This statement suggests that there is reason to believe that the opponents who would be judging were likely, at least in part, of Jewish background. They were insisting, similar to what we observe in Acts 15, a demand for adherence to the Jewish ritual law, among other requirements, which has become void through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. This ritual included symbols and ceremonies that foreshadowed Christ’s atoning work. Therefore, it had lost its purpose and function once Christ

³⁰ Robert M. Royalty, “*Dwelling on Visions: On the Nature of the So-called ‘Colossian 11 Heresy,’*” *Biblica* 83 (2002): 355.

arrived on the scene as the true Sacrifice, the “Body” to which the “shadow” refers (v.17). The book of Hebrews emphasizes this same truth.

In Hebrews 9, the author posits that the earthly Tabernacle with its services was all symbolism, including the offering of “gifts and sacrifices” (v. 9) which were connected to “festival or new moon or sabbath.” This was “concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation” (v. 10). The old covenant was inadequate in removing sins (Hebrews 10:4), which is why Christ, as the “Mediator of the new covenant,” offered redemption for the sins committed under the first covenant through His death (Hebrews 9:15). The law, described as a “shadow of the good things to come,” could never, through its repeated sacrifices, make people perfect (Hebrews 10:1). There are clear parallels between the language of Colossians 2:16-17 and Hebrews 9, 10.

In the immediate context of 2:13-15, where Paul describes the forgiveness of sins and the disarming of the powers through the cross, the references to food and drink in Colossians 2:16 likely echo the same rituals associated with the old covenant mentioned in Hebrews 9:10. These rituals involved food and drink and were “fleshly ordinances” imposed until the time of Christ’s reformation. The “shadows of coming things” in Colossians 2:17 mirror the sacrificial rituals described in Hebrews 10:1, which are symbolic of the greater reality fulfilled in Christ. It is interesting to note that the three components mentioned in Colossians 2:16 (feasts, new moon, and sabbaths) also appear together and sequentially in Ezekiel 45:17;

“Then it shall be the prince’s part to give burnt offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings, at the feasts, the New Moons, the Sabbath, and at all the appointed seasons of the house of Israel.”

This passage clarifies that these special days (feasts, new moons, and sabbaths) were the occasions for making ritual offerings, including grain (food) and drink offerings, as well as burnt, sin, and peace offerings. The emphasis here is on ritual sacrifices tied to specific holy days.

To show that this alignment is not a mere coincidence, a broader look at the biblical evidence is necessary. According to Giem, the most significant parallel to this structure is found in Numbers 28 and 29.³¹ Numbers 28:9-10 describe the burnt offerings, grain (food) offerings, and drink offerings for the weekly Sabbath. Numbers 28:16-29:40 details the various offerings made for annual festivals, including burnt, grain, drink, sin, and peace offerings.

This close alignment reinforces the connection between Colossians 2:16 and the ritual observances prescribed in the Old Testament, especially those in connection with sacred times and sacrificial offerings. Here is a collection of references that highlight the same three components, showing their connection: Nehemiah 10:32-33, Hosea 2:11, 1 Chronicles 23:30-31, 2 Chronicles 2:4, 2 Chronicles 8:12-13, 2 Chronicles 31:3, Numbers 28-29, Ezekiel 45:17. In these passages, the triad often appears in contexts that describe the king's or community's responsibility to provide burnt offerings, grain offerings, and other sacrifices for the appointed times. Although the order in which they appear may vary, Young posits that these variations are not significant in terms of their meaning. What stands out is the clear link to the regular burnt offering in all of these references, except Hosea 2:16.³² The emphasis falls not only on the calendar itself but on the sacrificial worship associated with it. By adopting this triadic formula, Paul evokes a well-known pattern of sacred time that

³¹ Paul Giem, "Sabbatôn in Col 2:16," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19 (1981): 208-9.

³² Young, 16.

includes both annual festivals and weekly sabbaths, together with the cultic observances that accompany them.

All of these Old Testament passages (Nehemiah 10:32-33, Hosea 2:11, 1 Chronicles 23:30-31, 2 Chronicles 2:4, 2 Chronicles 8:12-13, 2 Chronicles 31:3) establish a model for understanding Paul's phrase "a festival or a new moon or sabbaths" in Colossians 2:16 as a clear allusion to the burnt offerings made during weekly, monthly, and yearly festivals, together with the daily offerings made in the temple in accordance with Mosaic law. The attention is on the ritual offerings associated with these days which is the connection link when these observances are mentioned. The days and festivals themselves were not inherently foreshadowing future events or Christ, but the ritual sacrifices made during those were symbolic. Giem posits that the weekly Sabbaths, which commemorated creation (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 2:11; 31:17; Mark 2:27), also served as memorials rather than "shadows" of Christ, since these were not connected to the sanctuary rituals.³³ The new moon celebrations were not directly linked to the sanctuary rituals and did not symbolize or foreshadow Christ and His sacrifice.

In this context, the references to food and drink pertain to ceremonial practices linked to rituals such as the Passover meal. This is clarified in v.17, which indicates these practices were symbolic shadows of things to come,³⁴ with the substance being found in Christ. Once the substance, which is Christ, arrived, these rituals and their practices were no longer necessary; thus, Paul's advice to his addressees not to be judged by their observance of these former practices. The Jerusalem Council had already addressed these issues (Acts 15:19-29), affirming that the focus of the gospel

³³ Young, 16.

³⁴ Ibid., 19.

should now be on Christ and his atoning work, rather than adhering to outdated rituals that merely foreshadowed His coming.

In Colossians 2:18-23, Paul issues additional warnings to the Colossian Christians. He warns that they should not allow anyone to “cheat” them of their spiritual reward through behaviours and beliefs (v. 19) as “not holding firmly” to Christ, who delivers growth that comes from God. These behaviours addressed in v. 18 include practices such as self-imposed asceticism, worship of angels, the elaboration on visions, and a prideful mindset focused on earthly matters.

In vv. 20-22, Paul challenges his readers to reflect on their behaviour: “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations, ‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using-according to the commandments and doctrines of men?” Paul highlights some points here: 1. These regulations they have subjected themselves to are prohibitions, focused on abstaining from sensory experiences like touching, tasting, and handling. 2. The readers have, out of their own will, subjected themselves to these rules, which are the same types of decrees that Christ’s death rendered obsolete in v.14. 3. These rules concern things that are temporary and perishable. 4. The readers are following human commandments and teachings, and not those given by God or Christ. Verse 20 suggests that these regulations are connected to the basic principles of the world, from which the addresses have been freed by their death with Christ through baptism (vv. 12-13).

These basic principles, in v. 8, were earlier associated with “the tradition of men” and contradicted with Christ. Therefore, Paul’s negative view of these principles is reinforced by their connection to the regulations in v. 20. In v. 23, Paul

concludes his assessment of these regulations or rules: “These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.” We observe that practices like self-imposed piety, fake self-humility, and extreme asceticism characterised the rules they were following. However, Paul asserts that while these practices may seem wise, they are ineffective in restraining sinful desires. The reason for this failure is that these practices rely solely on human effort, leaving no place for Christ to be involved.

In 3:1-5, Paul goes on to urge his readers to embrace and uphold their new life in Christ:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things of the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

A careful observance of this list of practices put to death in the flesh reveals that it is not a set of self-imposed human regulations. Instead, it reflects the sinful behaviours one leaves behind when coming to Christ. Those raised to a new life with Christ must have their thoughts and motivations centred on Him, rather than on a set of rules. The command to “set your minds on things above” is explained in the preceding verse: “Seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.” The focus of someone whose life is now hidden with Christ in God shifts to Christ, who holds all power and authority to free the soul from fleshly desires. It is only through Christ that one can conquer the indulgence of the flesh. Mortification, self-imposed rituals, and ascetic practices cannot curb sinful desires. In addition, Paul in 3:8 outlines other things the Colossians needed to avoid: “anger,

wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language,” because they have been made new persons through God who created them (vv. 9-10). Therefore, no one succeeds without Christ, who is all in all for the believer (v. 11).

In 3:12-14, Paul outlines the qualities that Christians are called to “put on”: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving others, just as Christ forgave them. Above all, they are to put on love, which brings everything together in complete unity (3:14). These qualities are not merely actions, but a transformation of character that reflects Christ’s exemplary nature. Paul further describes the transformed life of the person who is now hidden with Christ: “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord” (vv. 15-16). The indwelling of Christ’s word brings about gratitude and joy, which naturally overflows into praise and encouragement shared with others. The ethical exhortations of 3:12-14 thus stand in striking contrast to the regulations of 2:20-23 and confirm that Paul’s alternative to “judging” over food and days is a life shaped by Christlike love.

Paul concludes this section in v. 17 with a powerful summary: “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” The name of Jesus carries great power. When everything is done and spoken in His name, it leads to thanksgiving to God, as self-centeredness is set aside and Christ is given the focus.

Within this literary and theological structure, *sabbatōn* participates in Paul’s larger critique of practices that were once meaningful but now must be understood in light of Christ’s fulfilment. The term appears not as an isolated datum but as part of a

well-known Old Testament calendar formula (“festival-new moon-sabbaths”), signaling that Paul is addressing a broader ritual system rather than a single ordinance. Its placement in the argument reinforces three points:

1. *Sabbatōn* belongs to a category of sacred times whose meaning is now recalibrated around Christ.
2. The issue is not the value of the sabbath per se, but the use of sacred time as a criterion for judging Christian identity.
3. Paul’s pastoral goal is to preserve the community’s fidelity to Christ rather than their adherence to ritual boundary markers.

The structure of 2:6-23 reveals that Paul’s concern is not primarily calendrical but christological and pastoral. He warns against allowing any ritual observance, including sabbaths, to overshadow the believer’s union with Christ. Reading 2:16 within this flow prevents the interpreter from isolating *sabbatōn* from its rhetorical and theological context and provides the necessary foundation for the detailed exegetical work that follows.

Lexical and Syntactical Analyses

This section of the study conducts lexical and syntactical analyses of *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16. In this section, the study surveys the use of *sabbatōn* in several domains: the New Testament, the Septuagint and Hebrew Bible, Classical Greek and Rabbinic Writings, and Cultural Connotations and the Reco-Roman World. Standard lexicons such as Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich (BDAG), Louw-Nida, the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT), and Liddell-Scott-Jones (LSJ) are consulted, not merely to list glosses but to trace how the term functions in different cultural and religious settings. This broader survey provides the basis for assessing how *sabbatōn* is likely to be heard in Colossians 2:16.

Meaning and Origins of *Sabbatōn*

The Greek noun *σάββατον* (*sabbatōn*, neuter) is a direct loanword from the Hebrew *שַׁבָּת* (*šabbāt*), mediated through the Greek of the Septuagint and the broader Jewish Diaspora.³⁵ It has 69 occurrences in the New Testament. Standard New Testament lexicons agree that its primary sense is the seventh day of the week, consecrated as a day of rest from ordinary labour and devoted to worship, and, by extension, the Sabbath institution as a legally and theologically significant category.³⁶ In a secondary but important usage, *σάββατον* can also denote a "week" or seven-day period, especially in constructions where a numeral precedes the term, as in *μία τῶν σαββάτων*, "the first (day) of the week" (Mark 16:2; cf. 1 Cor 16:2).³⁷ This semantic flexibility hints that *sabbatōn* can refer either to the individual sacred day, to the weekly cycle defined by it, or to the entire pattern of Sabbath observance, and therefore must be kept in view when interpreting *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16.

Sabbatōn in the New Testament

Within the New Testament, *sabbatōn* occurs most frequently in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, where narrative contexts presuppose a shared understanding of the Sabbath and rarely pause to explain it.³⁸ Thayer notes that, apart from Hebrews, *sabbatōn* appears in Paul only in Colossians 2:16 and in the idiomatic phrase, *μία*

³⁵ Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 909-10; Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 566.

³⁶ Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 909-10; Thayer, *Lexicon*, 566; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1:67.184.

³⁷ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 1:67.177; Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 175-76.

³⁸ Thayer, *Lexicon*, 566.

σαββάτου/μία τῶν σαββάτων in 1 Corinthians 16:2, where the phrase clearly functions as the first day of the week rather than the seventh-day Sabbath itself.³⁹ Formally, both the singular *σάββατον* and the plural *σαββάτα* can mean "Sabbath" or "Sabbaths," respectively. In context, either form may carry the broader sense of "week."⁴⁰ Louw and Nida reflect this semantic tension by classifying *sabbatōn* in two distinct domains: 1. "Sabbath," denoting a religious festival and day of rest; and 2. "week," where it signifies a seven-day period.⁴¹

This duality is evident in idiomatic expressions surrounding the term. Phrases such as *τὸ σάββατον ποιεῖν* ("to keep/observe the Sabbath") focus on ritual practice, whereas *δίς τοῦ σαββάτου* ("twice a week," Luke 18:12) uses the same word to structure time in recurring units.⁴² When Paul writes in Colossians 2:16 of *έορτή*, *νεομηνία*, and *σαββάτα*, he invokes a familiar triad of sacred times, annual feasts, monthly new moons, and weekly Sabbaths, suggesting that he has cultic observance in view rather than a neutral chronological label.⁴³ BDAG explicitly lists Colossians 2:16 under the sense of "Sabbath (day, observance)," distinguishing this from narrative uses where *σάββατον* clearly functions as "week."⁴⁴

***Sabbatōn* in the Septuagint and Hebrew Bible**

Sabbath as a word occurs eighty-seven times in the Old Testament. Out of the eighty-seven occurrences, thirty-five are plural. *sabbatōn* is used ten times in the

³⁹ Thayer, *Lexicon*, 566. cf. discussion in Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 175-76.

⁴⁰ Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 909-10; Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 175-76.

⁴¹ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 1:67.177, 67.184.

⁴² Thayer, *Lexicon*, 566; Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 1:67.177.

⁴³ Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 175-76.

⁴⁴ Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 909-10.

phrase festivals⁴⁵, new moon, Sabbaths (cf. 2 Kings 4:23; 1 Chronicles 12:31; 2 Chronicles 2:4; 8:13; 31:3; Nehemiah 10:33; Isaiah 1:13, 14; Ezekiel 45:17; Hosea 2:11).⁴⁶ In all ten times this phrase occurs, the contexts suggest appointed feasts that had to be proclaimed in their appointed times.

The Septuagint background confirms that *σάββατον* is deeply rooted in Israel's scriptural tradition. In the Greek Pentateuch, *σάββατον* regularly translates Hebrew שָׁבַט and thus inherits its associations with divine rest (Gen 2:2-3), covenant sign (Exod 31:13-17), and humanitarian relief for servants, resident foreigners, and even livestock (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15).⁴⁷ The term appears in legal, narrative, and prophetic contexts, where it marks sacred time structured by God's creative and redemptive acts. The Septuagint's usage also broadens the range of *sabbatōn* to include "Sabbaths" attached to annual festivals (e.g., Lev 23) and jubilee legislation, so that the word can denote not only the weekly day but also festal days characterised by cessation from work.⁴⁸ Modern LXX lexa therefore gloss *sabbatōn* as both "Sabbath (day)" and "Sabbath observance," noting its frequent occurrence (approximately 130 times) in legal and cultic passages where obedience to Sabbath law serves as a marker of covenant loyalty and communal identity.⁴⁹

Frank M. Hasel's study of the Sabbath in the Anchor Bible Dictionary likewise shows that, already in the Old Testament, "Sabbath" functions as more than a

⁴⁵ Other times referred to as feasts.

⁴⁶ See James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, updated ed., s.v. "sabbath," "Sabbaths."

⁴⁷ Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003), 546; G. F. Hasel, "Sabbath," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:849-50.

⁴⁸ Lust, Eynikel, and Hauspie, *Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 546.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; Hasel, "Sabbath," 5:849-50.

bare time unit. Rather, it emerges as a theologically charged symbol of God's creative sovereignty, redemptive grace, and eschatological hope.⁵⁰ For a Torah-formed Jew like Paul, the plural *σαββάτα* in Colossians 2:16 inevitably evokes this dense scriptural background. It would carry associations of sacred time, law, and identity.

***Sabbatōn* in Classical Greek and Rabbinic Writings**

Outside the biblical corpus, *sabbatōn* is treated in the major classical lexicon as a relatively late loanword used by Greek authors to describe the Jewish day of rest and its customs.⁵¹ Liddell-Scott-Jones (LSJ) cites occurrences in writers such as Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch, where *σάββατον* and *σαββάτα* function as ethnic markers: they name a specifically Jewish practice that both fascinates and puzzles non-Jewish observers.⁵² Philo and Josephus, by contrast, write from within Judaism and use *sabbatōn* frequently as shorthand for a complex pattern of worship, rest, and communal discipline; Sabbath observance is one of the most visible expressions of Jewish piety and distinctiveness in the Greco-Roman world.⁵³

Rabbinic sources, though primarily in Hebrew and Aramaic, confirm this picture. The Sabbath is elaborated through detailed halakhic regulations that specify prohibited work, permitted acts of mercy, and the liturgical character of the day. The Greek loanword *sabbatōn*, when it appears in Jewish-Greek settings, therefore points not merely to a date on the calendar but to a whole way of life ordered around

⁵⁰ Hasel, "Sabbath," 5:849-56.

⁵¹ Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry S. Jones, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., with rev. suppl. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940-1968), s.v. "σάββατον."

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged in one volume, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), s.v. "Sabbath."

recurring sacred time.⁵⁴ TDNT summarises this by arguing that Sabbath "structures the whole existence of Israel" by rhythmically orienting work, worship, and social life toward the Creator and his covenant.⁵⁵

Cultural Connotations and the Greco-Roman World

In the wider Greco-Roman milieu, *σάββατον* thus carried strong ethnic and religious overtones. To speak of "Sabbaths" was to speak of Jewish sacred times that visibly distinguished Jews from their neighbours: times when shops closed, travel ceased, and synagogue assemblies gathered. Some pagan writers mocked Jewish Sabbath-keeping as idleness or superstition, while others admired the rhythm of rest and study it provided.⁵⁶ Lexically, *sabbatōn* could be understood by Greek speakers as a technical term belonging to the Jewish religious vocabulary, even as it became familiar enough to serve as a way of expressing "week" in ordinary usage when combined with numerals.⁵⁷

This semantic and cultural profile is crucial for interpreting Colossians 2:16. Paul is not introducing an obscure or neutral term; he is invoking language charged with scriptural and communal resonance. In BDAG, the entry for *σάββατον* notes that in Colossians 2:16 the word refers to sacred days of rest in continuity with Jewish Torah practice rather than simply a seven-day span.⁵⁸ Harris's exegetical guide to Colossians observes that the *σαββάτα* of 2:16 "cannot plausibly be reduced to a mere calendrical label," since the term stands in parallel with *έορτή* and *νεομηνία* and forms

⁵⁴ Kittel and Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "Sabbath."

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ LSJ, s.v. "σάββατον"; TDNT, s.v. "Sabbath."

⁵⁷ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 1:67.177; Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 175-76.

⁵⁸ Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 909-10.

part of a cluster of Torah-based observances now relativised in light of Christ's work.⁵⁹

In light of the lexical evidence surveyed above, *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 functions as a synecdoche for Jewish sacred times: it names days and institutions that once served as covenant markers but are now interpreted as "shadow" in contrast to the eschatological "body" that belongs to Christ (2:17).⁶⁰

Syntactical Study

A look at the syntax of the context within which *sabbatōn* falls would produce a meaningful result. It should be noted that the word *sabbatōn* is used once in Colossians (2:16). To begin with, considering the structure of 2:16, the author uses *oun* which is an inferential conjunction. Inferential conjunctions are translated *therefore* and they give a deduction, conclusion, or summary to the preceding discussion.⁶¹ Curtis Vaughan sees the use of *oun* in this context as showing "that this and the following warnings grow out of what Paul has said earlier in the preceding verses."⁶² Considering the context, this suggests that 2:16 is a conclusion of the previous discussion. Therefore, to better understand what *sabbatōn* is and whether it is binding, we should consider the preceding verses (2:6ff).

Paul warns his addressees not to be taken captive by false teachers whose teachings are based on human tradition and things of the world (v. 8) because in Christ, all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form and they have been given

⁵⁹ Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 175-76.

⁶⁰ TDNT, s.v. "Sabbath"; Hasel, "Sabbath," 5:852-56.

⁶¹ Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, s. v. "Sabbath." Wallace, *New Testament Syntax*, 298.

⁶² Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 11*, ed., Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 203.

fullness in Christ (9) and circumcised (11). It seems here that some people, probably Jews, taught in the church that the uncircumcised could not be saved (cf. Acts 15:1). Paul therefore warns them not to bow to such teachings because their circumcision is not of men but of Christ through baptism (11). Therefore, through faith they are raised with Christ from by the power of God, thereby, attaining salvation (12).

This teaching is not new of Paul. Similar instance occurred in Antioch (Gal 2:11). Peter used to eat with the Gentiles until some men came from James. He then separated himself from the Gentiles and this led other Jews, including Barnabas, do likewise (vv. 12, 13). Paul rebuked Peter (v. 14) by reminding him that justification does not come by observing the law but rather by faith in Jesus Christ (vv.15, 16). According to Paul, the uncircumcision of the Gentiles means being dead in their sins and holding on to their sinful nature (v.13). But God has made them alive with Christ and has forgiven them of their sins (v.13) by blotting out the handwriting of ordinances which was against us and nailing it to the cross (v. 14). *Ceiro,grafon* “handwritten” means something or any document that is written by the hand and is binding legally.⁶³ *Do,gmasin* “ordinances” comes from the word *dogma*, which means “a law (civil, ceremonial or ecclesiastical)-decree, ordinance.”⁶⁴

Do,gmasin can, therefore, in context, be interpreted as including circumcision. The Greek *U`penanti,on* “against” is translated as something that opposes or is contrary to or against another.⁶⁵ These suggest that the laws which were blotted out and nailed to the cross in this context have to do with ordinances which were written by hand and were against us. The “handwritten ordinances” refers to the ceremonial

⁶³ See also, Strong, Exhaustive Concordance, s.v. “*ceiro,grafon*”; Vaughan, 201.

⁶⁴ Strong, Exhaustive Concordance, s. v. *do,gma*

⁶⁵ See also, *u`penanti,oj*

law which was written in Moses' handwriting (Acts 15:1; John 7:22; Deut. 39:1). It was against us because it made Christ of no value to us and made us debtors to the whole law (Gal 5:2-4; Deut. 31:24-26).⁶⁶ Paul then concludes in Col 2:16 by commanding the Gentiles to be careful not to allow others to judge them in respect of *e`orth/j h' neomhni,aj h' sabbatwn* "festivals or new moon or Sabbaths." Since God commanded Moses and Aaron that foreigners could not eat of the Passover (Exod 12:43) and even proselytes who lived among the Israelites could celebrate the Passover only when they and all the males in their household had been circumcised (Exod 12:48), it seems the false teachers who probably might be Jews were judging the Gentiles not to partake of the various Jewish feasts because they had not been circumcised.

In all, it may look inappropriate to interpret *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 as the weekly Sabbath found in the Decalogue. It should rather be interpreted as a period when the Jewish feasts were proclaimed and it was never related to a specific day. Besides, God commanded the Israelites when He was referring to the weekly Sabbath in the Decalogue that they must involve the strangers within their gates in the observance of the Sabbath (Exod 20:10). Therefore, if *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 which forms part of the Passover feast refers to the Sabbath in the Decalogue, God would not forbid foreigners from partaking of it. *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 should therefore be interpreted as a period when Jews had their national festivals which identified them from other peoples.

⁶⁶ See also, Steve Wohlberg, "Colossians 2:16: A Very Misunderstood Passage," *Wall Post*, July 7, 2006, June 21, 2024, [http:// www.colossians 21:6.org](http://www.colossians21:6.org).

Lexical-Syntactical Observations on κρινέτω and σκιά

The controlling clause in Colossians 2:16 is a prohibition: μή οὐδὲν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω. The verb κρινέτω (present active imperative, 3rd person singular from κρίνω) functions as the main predicate and governs the ensuing list of spheres in which judgment is being rendered. Although English translations often soften the 3rd-person imperative with “let no one...,” Wallace notes that the form ordinarily carries the force of obligation (“he must not...”), underscoring that Paul is not granting permission to judge but explicitly forbidding it.⁶⁷ The combination μή + present imperative likewise marks a prohibition. In terms of verbal aspect, the present imperative often expresses a general precept or an injunction to discontinue an activity already in progress; the syntax itself does not decide between these options, and the discourse context must supply the nuance.⁶⁸

Lexically, κρίνω ranges from the basic sense “to decide/judge” to the more adversarial “to pass judgment on, condemn,” especially in contexts where one party assumes evaluative authority over another.⁶⁹ In Colossians 2:16, the accusative ὑμᾶς identifies the believers as the object of the judging, while the subsequent prepositional phrases (ἐν βρώσει... ἐν πόσει... ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς... ἢ νουμηνίας ἢ σαββάτων) specify the respects in which the verdict is being pronounced. Wallace observes that ἐν + dative can function in a reference/respect sense (“with respect to”), which fits well

⁶⁷ Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 210-11.

⁶⁸ Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax*, 320-22.

⁶⁹ Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 567; Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., with revised supplement (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940-1968), s.v. “κρίνω”; Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 30.108; 56.20; 56.30.

here: Paul resists turning dietary practice and sacred times into boundary-markers by which outsiders adjudicate the standing of the community.⁷⁰

This grammatical profile also helps to balance functional and nominative senses of *sabbatōn*. The nouns themselves are calendrical designations, “festival ... new moon ... sabbaths,” and so have an unmistakable nominative reference to recognisable sacred times. Yet because they appear as complements within a larger expression of reference (“judge you with respect to...”), they simultaneously implicate the believers’ relation to those times (participation, abstention, or the communal rhythms that such days entail). Consequently, the syntax does not require an exclusive identification of *sabbatōn* either with the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue or with festival sabbaths alone; the point is that, whatever their precise referent in the opponents’ rhetoric, these markers are not to function as adjudicatory criteria for the Colossian believers.

Verse 17 gives the theological ground for the prohibition: ἃ ἐστὶν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων. Here *σκιά* functions as a predicate nominative describing the antecedent ἃ, while the genitive *τῶν μελλόντων* frames the referent as eschatologically oriented (“of the things to come”). In its literal sense, *σκιά* denotes the shadow cast by a tangible object; figuratively, it can denote an outline or foreshadowing that corresponds to, but is not identical with, the reality that produces it.⁷¹ Louw-Nida classifies this usage under the semantic category of “foreshadowing,” highlighting its anticipatory

⁷⁰ Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax*, 168.

⁷¹ Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 929-30; Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., with revised supplement (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940-1968), s.v. “σκιά.”

function rather than a merely negative evaluation.⁷² TDNT likewise traces the movement from physical shadow to metaphorical representation, in which the “shadow” points beyond itself to what gives it substance.⁷³ Thus, Paul’s contrast does not render sacred times meaningless; it relativises their authority as grounds for judging believers when the *σῶμα*, the reality to which the shadow corresponds, belongs to Christ

“Feasts (*heortē*), New Moon (*neomēnia*), Sabbaths”

It will yield this study much importance to consider the phrase “feasts (*heortē*), new moon (*neomēnia*), sabbath,” and the logic of the language used in Colossians 2:16.

Feasts (*heortē*)

The use of the Greek term *heortē* in the New Testament apart from Colossians 2:16 in both its larger and immediate contexts suggests that: it is used 16 times to indicate the Passover;⁷⁴ it is used 7 times in reference to the Feast of Tabernacles;⁷⁵ it used once to indicate Pentecost (John 5:1).⁷⁶ In accordance with the above, it becomes faithful to render *heortē* in the New Testament as harmoniously referring to what is termed the “pilgrim festivals,” which demanded the congregation of all the Israelite

⁷² Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1:593, §58.65.

⁷³ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 7:394.

⁷⁴ Matt 26:5; 27:15; Mark 14:2; 15:6; Luke 2:41, 42; 22:1; 23:17; John 2:23; 4:45 [x2]; 6:4; 11:56; 12:12, 20; 13:1, 29; Acts 18:21; 1 Cor 5:8.

⁷⁵ John 7:2, 8 [x2], 10, 11, 14, 37.

⁷⁶ Du Preez asserts that the one in John 5:1 could refer to, though this cannot be ascertained with all certainty, in Du Preez, 294.

men in Jerusalem for festival celebrations. Synonymously, the rendition of *heortē* in Hebrew is *hag*.⁷⁷ According to the *New Testament Greek-English Dictionary*, “the New Testament carries over the Septuagint’s use of *heortē*.”⁷⁸ Henry Cowles posits *heortē* as “referring to the three great annual festivals.”⁷⁹ Richard Davidson indicates that the Feast of Unleavened Bread (associated with the Passover), the Feast of Harvest (also called Pentecost), and the Feast of Ingathering (also called Tabernacles) found in Exodus 23:14-16, “are the *only* times of assembly in the cultic calendar actually called ‘feasts’ (*hag*) in Scripture.”⁸⁰ In the New Testament, the other festivals (the Day of Trumpets, and the Day of Atonement) are never called *heortē*. In the Old Testament, these festivals are known by a form of the noun *šabbāt*.⁸¹

The thought behind the use of *heortē* as mentioned by Paul in Colossians 2:16 signifies reference to the pilgrim festivals. *Sabbata*, therefore, is used here in Colossians 2:16 to determine the yearly ceremonial sabbaths of the Day of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement which are different from the pilgrim festivals, however, equally bearing holy convocation.⁸²

⁷⁷ *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary*: Delta-Epsilon, s.v., “heortē noun.”

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ 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: D. Appleton, 1879), 173.

⁸⁰ Richard M. Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” in *Symposium on Revelation: Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, book 1, Frank B. Holbrook, ed., *Daniel and Revelation Committee Series*, vol. 6 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 120. See also, John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, Classic Commentary Library (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 176.

⁸¹ Examples are Lev 23:24, 32; Lev 25:2-6 (this speaks of the Sabbatical Years).

⁸² *Ibid.* See also, Greg Taylor and Paula Taylor, “*An Open Letter to Our Friends and Family*,” <http://www.formeradventist.com/taylor.html> (Accessed September 1, 2024).

New Moon (neomēnia)

The mention of the “new moon” enjoys essential scholarly agreement;⁸³ just as the Hebrew term *hōdeš* (new moon) is universally accepted, so is its Greek equivalent *neomēnia*. The new moon is the focal point in the phrase, “feasts, new moon, sabbath.” Beyond the special burnt offerings (Num 28:11) and the blowing of the trumpets (Num 10:10; Ps 81:13), special attention was attached to the first day of each lunar month and considered so important. According to Merrill Unger, “As the festivals, according to 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.”⁸⁴ William Mounce explained that: “The month begins at the appearance of the new moon, the thin crescent visible at sunset.”⁸⁵ In Israel’s religious calendar, the new moon played “an especially decisive role,”⁸⁶ as the “new moon governed the dates for (all the) other religious festivals.”⁸⁷ As was discussed in the Structure above, the New Moon’s lunar computation determines the “feasts and *sabbata*” in Colossians 2:16. By the new moon,

The Inter-Textual Significance of Sabbatōn in Colossians 2:16

A possible allusion of the use of *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 is Leviticus 23. Here, the Lord speaks to Moses telling him to speak to the Israelites concerning God’s

⁸³ du Preez, 295.

⁸⁴ Merrill F. Unger, “Festivals,” *New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, R. K. Harrison, ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 409.

⁸⁵ William D. Mounce, ed. *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), s.v. “Month.”

⁸⁶ K. Koch, “*mō’ed*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 8, G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., Douglas W. Scott, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 170.

⁸⁷ *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Ronald F. Youngblood, ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), s.v. “Moon.”

appointed feasts which they were to proclaim as a holy assembly. The Hebrew *mo'ed*, “feasts” used here appears three times in the chapter (vv. 2, 4, 37). *Mo'ed* means an appointed meeting and it stresses the time of the feast.⁸⁸ In Leviticus 23:3, the Israelites are commanded to work in six days and to rest on the seventh day. They are not to do any other work. They are to regard that day as a sacred assembly and a Sabbath to the Lord. This appears to be synonymous with Exod. 20:8-10 and the Sabbath of creation.⁸⁹ The use of the Hebrew *shabbatōn* translated “rest” indicates “cessation” or “stop from labour or work.” The text seems to demonstrate a Sabbath of rest from all work. After presenting the seventh day weekly Sabbath to the Israelites, He further goes on to present the Lord’s appointed feasts which are also to be seen as a sacred assembly (v. 4).

The first is the Lord’s Passover and the Unleavened Bread, which begin at twilight on the fourteenth day and fifteenth day of the month, respectively (vv. 5, 6). During the latter, bread without yeast is eaten for seven days (v. 6). A sacred assembly is held on the first day, and no regular work is done on this day (v. 7). They present an offering made by fire to the Lord for seven days and hold a sacred assembly again on the seventh day where no work is done. This rest from work and sacred assembly held on the seventh day is Sabbath.⁹⁰ The Hebrew word translated feast (v.6) is, this time, not *mo'ed* but *chag*.

⁸⁸ See also “feast of the Lord” (Lev 23:2), *SDABC*, 1:800; James Strong, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, ed. Stephen D. Renn (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), s.v. “mo’ed.”

⁸⁹ See also R. Laird Harris, “*The Feasts and Worship of the Lord*,” Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary, vol. 1, 115; Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, 104; Nathaniel Micklem, “Holy onvocation,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 110; “The Sabbath of the Lord” (Lev 23:3), *SDABC*, 1:80

⁹⁰ See also Micklem, 110.

Chag stresses on the character of the feast. It is used four times in this chapter (vv. 6, 34, 39, 41). Out of all the feasts mentioned in this chapter, *chag* is used of three of the feasts (Unleavened Bread, First Fruit, and Tabernacles). *Chag* appears to have been derived from a verb that has, as one of its possible meanings, “to make pilgrimage”.⁹¹ Perhaps, this is why some Bible scholars call these feasts “The Pilgrimage Festivals”.⁹² This demonstrates that the feast’s Sabbath mentioned here is not about a specific appointed time of meeting like it is in v. 3, but it has to do with how the feast is to be celebrated. Therefore, the meaning of the seven days within which the *Chag*, “Feast” of Unleavened Bread, is to be eaten should not be stressed on a specific day for celebrating the feast, but rather on making sure it is celebrated within seven days starting from the fifteenth day of the month, that is, it can fall on any day at all.

The second is the Feast of Weeks. It takes place when the Israelites bring a sheaf of their first grain after the Sabbath (v. 10). After the Sabbath, they are to count off seven Sabbaths. Then, they count off again fifty days and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord (v. 16). On this same day, they are to present lambs, a bull, and rams as offerings, and also to proclaim a sacred assembly; they are to do no work (v. 21). That day is also Sabbath. In this context, the term “Sabbath” is used for a festal rest day connected with the counting of weeks, not for the fixed weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue. The festive sabbath could therefore fall on different calendar dates depending on when the counting began, even though the weekly Sabbath remained anchored to the seventh day of the week.

⁹¹ “The Sabbath of the Lord,” *SDABC*, 1:802.

⁹² See also Micklem, 110.

The third is the Feast of Trumpets (vv. 23-25). It is celebrated on the first day of the seventh month. It is supposed to be a day of rest and a sacred assembly. The Israelites are to do no work and present an offering made by fire to the Lord. Here again, a festal rest day is called “Sabbath,” and because it is tied to a calendar date, the first day of the seventh month, rather than to the weekly cycle, it can fall on any day of the week.

The fourth, the Feast of Atonement, is celebrated on the tenth day of the seventh month (Lev 23:26-32). Israel is to hold a sacred convocation and present an offering made by fire to the Lord (v. 27). They are also to do no work at all (v. 31) since it is a Sabbath of rest. It begins from the evening of the ninth day of the month until the evening of the next day (v. 32). Like the previous texts, the Sabbath here falls on a date (tenth day of the seventh month) and not on a day. This means that it can fall on any day on the calendar.

The fifth is the Feast of Tabernacles. It is to be celebrated after they have gathered the crops of the land, starting the fifteenth day of the seventh month, and it lasts for seven days during which offerings are presented to the Lord (vv. 34, 36). The first and eighth days are sacred assemblies where no work is to be done. They are to rejoice within the seven days and live in booths (vv. 35, 36, 40, 42). Once again, the Hebrew word used, which is translated “feast” in vv. 34, 39, and 41 is *chag*. This renders the text meaningful when periods for the rest are interpreted as falling on any day of the year instead of a particular day.

Paul’s message stresses that Christian conduct should be rooted in a relationship with Christ; while external standards or rules might offer guidance, they are powerless without a Christ-centred life. True transformation comes from within, as the believer seeks to reflect Christ’s character. This shift allows Christians to

experience freedom and peace, living a life filled with gratitude and joy, guided by the principles of the gospel rather than superficial rules or societal expectations.

Summary

Chapter Three argues that *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 should be understood in terms of ceremonial sabbaths linked to Israel’s festal and sacrificial calendar, rather than the weekly seventh-day Sabbath of the Decalogue. Working from the historical situation in Colossae, a mix of Jewish ritualism, asceticism, and mystical speculation, the chapter shows that Paul’s warning in 2:16 (“let no one judge you...”) flows directly from Christ’s cancelling of the “handwriting of ordinances” in 2:14. A detailed lexical and structural study of the triad “festival, new moon, sabbaths” demonstrates that this is a stock calendrical formula drawn from the Old Testament, where it consistently denotes annual feasts, monthly new moons, and sabbath-like holy days. The fact that *sabbata* is anarthrous in Col 2:16, stands in this triad, and is closely tied to sacrificial contexts (Leviticus 23; Numbers 28–29; Ezekiel 45:17, etc.) supports the conclusion that Paul is targeting festal sabbaths and their associated rituals, not the creation-based weekly Sabbath.

Based on the exegesis in this chapter, clear theological implications emerge. Colossians 2:16-17 portrays Paul rejecting the use of ceremonial observances, dietary rules, festival cycles, and sacrificial sabbaths, as criteria for judging Christian faithfulness, because these were “shadows” that have reached their goal in Christ, the “body” or substance. The text is not treated as a blanket abolition of all Sabbath theology, but as a Christ-centered reorientation: what defines God’s people is not adherence to Old Covenant ritual markers but participation in Christ’s death and resurrection. In the flow of Colossians 2:20-3:17, the true mark of the believer is a transformed life, seeking things above, putting to death sinful desires, and putting on

Christlike virtues, rather than submission to “do not touch, do not taste, do not handle.” Thus, Chapter Three presents Col 2:16-17 as a strong affirmation of Christ’s sufficiency and a warning against returning to ritual boundary-markers as the measure of spirituality.

CHAPTER 4

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In light of the preceding exegesis, the divine meaning of Colossians 2:16 can be seen as grounded in God's unfolding redemptive drama. As a New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright observes, theology is not a static system of propositions but part of "theo-dramatic" Scripture, the unfolding story of God's work in history. Wright even proposes a five-act hermeneutic in which the Bible functions like a play, inviting readers to "inhabit the drama." In this view, exegesis supplies the "script," while theology is the enacted meaning of that script in life. Colossians 2:16-17 must thus be understood not in isolation but as one scene in God's grand narrative.

In the act of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, all the old ceremonial laws reach their climax: they are fulfilled and brought to an end. Paul's warning, "do not let anyone judge you in respect to a festival... or sabbath," is God speaking into the church's life to declare: these cultic observances have lost their authority now that "the substance is of Christ". This interpretation resonates with the thesis's own conclusion that Colossians 2:16-17 affirms Christ's sufficiency and warns against returning to ritual markers. In theological terms, God is saying that the sabbaths and feasts were God's "shadows" pointing to Jesus, and now that Christ has come, those shadows give way to the living reality of his person and work. This insight is consonant with Adventist theology and Scripture's own self-presentation. As Adventist pastors remind their congregations, "Christ had nailed the ceremonial laws to the cross," ending their jurisdiction. In Paul's language, the old "handwriting of

requirements” has been cancelled (Col. 2:14) so that the believer’s identity is no longer defined by festivals, new moons, or sabbaths, but by union with Christ through baptism.

Scripture itself is understood as God’s communicative act, a living speech-act of the triune God, so true exegesis must lead toward theology, as Anthony C. Thiselton emphasises. That is, studying Colossians 2:16 inevitably thrusts us into theology: we must ask “What is God doing here?” and “What does this say about God’s plan?” The answer, revealed in this passage, is that God is redefining his people around the resurrection. In God’s ongoing story, the former covenant symbols have been fulfilled (the “shadow”) and now the church lives by the “body,” Christ himself (Col. 2:17). This Christocentric reorientation means that God’s people are defined not by rule-keeping but by participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, as the thesis notes. The cosmic outcome is clear: divine judgment of those old days has been rendered null by the drama of the cross, and the church’s mission is to live in that new reality.

Put another way, Wright’s insight reminds us that theological implications are always located within the mission of God’s people. God’s story is covenantal and missional, moving from Creation and Israel to the body of Christ and ultimate restoration. Colossians 2:16 should thus be heard against the backdrop of that gospel narrative. In the “Scripture-as-drama” picture, Jesus’ sacrifice is the climactic act that renders obsolete any attempt to measure faith by ritual observance. The theological lesson, the enacted meaning, is that the church now moves forward not as a sectarian observance society but as a living community commissioned to embody the Gospel. Paul’s injunction to not be judged on sabbaths is not a theological drift toward antinomianism, but a declaration of freedom: in God’s mission, the witness of Christ’s

body is sufficient. As Kevin Vanhoozer puts it, preaching, and by extension Christian life, is a “theo-dramatic performance” that “declares and enacts” the truth. Thus, the divine intent of Colossians 2:16 is to set the stage for believers to live out the truth that Jesus is “all that matters, and he lives in all of us” (Col. 3:11), not to abandon the Sabbath commandment itself. In this light, God’s ongoing story is one of moving from shadowy types to full reality, and this passage reveals that progression in Paul’s epoch.

Practical Pastoral Implications

For lay preachers in the Central Ghana Conference, these theological findings carry concrete implications for ministry. In Adventist understanding, Colossians 2:16 actually vindicates the Sabbath rather than undermining it, as it affirms that ceremonial sabbaths have come to an end. Still, the seventh-day Sabbath, a creation ordinance and moral law, endures. Pastors can confidently teach that Paul was addressing Jewish festival days, not God’s original rest-day, echoing historic Adventist belief. This has several practical outworkings:

Preaching and Teaching

Sermons should situate Colossians 2:16 within God’s redemptive narrative and highlight Christ’s centrality. Using a narrative or dramatic approach as Wright advocates, a lay preacher might recount Israel’s pilgrimage festivals and show how Jesus fulfills them. For example, one can explain that the “festivals, new moons, sabbaths” form a chiasmic pattern of Israel’s holy days, all pointing to God’s presence. Paul’s message, then, is not abolishing true worship but uprooting any legalistic or cultic distortions. As one Adventist commentator notes, these Jewish holy days were “shadows of things to come,” whose reality has arrived in Christ. In these pages,

Bacchiocchi comments extensively on Colossians 2:16-17, arguing that Paul understands the listed Jewish holy days as shadow-ordinances pointing forward to Christ's redemptive work. Thus, sermons can stress that Christians today worship the risen Christ (Col. 2:17) and live in his body, not under old curse-laden ordinances. Preaching can also embody this truth: rather than lecturing, pastors should model Christlike authenticity, for as Vanhoozer insists, the preacher "embodies" the message. In Ghana's oral culture, vivid storytelling helps. Through narrative homiletics and personal example, preachers can lead the flock to respond not with confusion or controversy over Colossians 2:16, but with gratitude that Christ is "all that matters" (Col. 3:11) in the story of salvation.

Church Education and Formation

Theological education programs, such as Sabbath School classes, lay-leader seminars, or Theological Education, should explicitly include this Colossians study. Training materials can contrast the ceremonial sabbaths of the Old Covenant with the enduring moral Sabbath, citing Col. 2:16-17. Lay preachers should learn to explain in simple terms that Christ's death "wiped out" the old system of shadows, ending the requirement to observe those festival sabbaths. At the same time, they should affirm that the fourth commandment, God's creation rest-day, remains an ethical standard "for everyone" as a sign of gratitude. In practice, pastors can organise workshops where participants role-play disciples questioning Paul's logic, then work through the answers. Bible study groups might read the relevant Hebrew background (e.g. Ezekiel 45:17) to see how "sabbaths" functioned in temple law, highlighting Paul's innovative usage in Colossians. Emphasising Paul's Christocentric ethic, that true faith is measured by transformation, not by ritual, is crucial. As the thesis notes, Paul teaches that Christian conduct should be rooted in a relationship with Christ and that

transformation comes from within as believers reflect Jesus' character, leading to a life filled with gratitude and joy under the gospel rather than external rules. Church education can build on curricula and discipleship programs to reinforce the inner, spiritual rest found in Christ and mobilise members to live out the gospel, practical service, witness, and community as the truest evidence of Sabbath-keeping faith.

Ecumenical and Interdenominational Engagement

Ghana is a deeply Christian country, and Adventists often interact with other denominations in community life. Understanding Colossians 2:16 has ecumenical value because it clarifies that Adventists are not anti-law but pro-Christ. In dialogues with Sunday-keeping brethren or in mixed congregational events, lay preachers can explain that this verse addresses cultic practices, not the moral Ten Commandments. This softens disputes and opens witness opportunities. Preachers should emphasise the common ground: all agree Christ is Lord of the law. They can share the big-picture narrative: God's mission was to rescue all peoples through Jesus, the true centre of worship, and Paul's letter to the Colossians is set in that mission context. By framing Colossians 2:16 as part of the gospel story, lay preachers communicate humility and continuity. Even when disagreements remain over which day to keep, the shared commitment to Jesus and the apostolic gospel can dominate the conversation. Lay leaders might collaborate with other pastors on joint Bible studies about the New Covenant, demonstrating that Adventism's perspective on Law and Gospel is rooted in Scripture and not peculiar tradition. In short, the theological extract that Christ's sacrifice is sufficient and ritual judgment is misplaced, provides a basis for loving dialogue and mutual witness in Ghana's interdenominational milieu.

Equipping Lay Preachers as Contextual Bible Teachers

Because this thesis explicitly aims to “equip lay preachers in Central Ghana Conference,” one important implication is methodological: lay preachers need basic tools of historical-grammatical interpretation so they can move from text to theology to practice with confidence. Training programs at conference and district levels can draw on Colossians 2:16 as a case study in how to:

- Read a verse in its literary unit (2:6-23) rather than in isolation.
- Trace Old Testament echoes (Num 28-29; Ezek 45:17) and see how they shape meaning.
- Distinguish between what in the text is culturally specific (e.g., local ascetic practices) and what is theologically enduring (e.g., Christ’s supremacy).
- Formulate theological implications that are faithful to the text yet sensitive to Ghanaian realities.

When lay preachers learn to handle a contested text like Colossians 2:16 well, they become better equipped to handle many other passages. This, in turn, raises the level of biblical literacy in the churches they serve.

Using Colossians 2:16 in Evangelism and Public Apologetics

Given the researcher’s experience with radio Bible studies in Kumasi, where callers frequently invoke Colossians 2:16 against Sabbath observance, this text has clear apologetic significance. Rather than avoiding the passage, evangelism in Central Ghana Conference can incorporate it explicitly into public preaching. Pragmatically, lay preachers can:

- Prepare simple, memorable explanations of the festival-new moon-Sabbaths triad, emphasising its link to sacrificial offerings rather than to the moral law of the Decalogue.
- Contrast salvation by grace through faith in Christ with salvation by calendar conformity, showing that Paul opposes the latter, not the former.
- Use Colossians 2:16 alongside other passages such as Hebrews 9-10 and Acts 15 to show the New Testament's consistent pattern: ceremonial shadows have reached their goal in Christ, but God's moral will and creation gifts remain.

In public settings, tone is as important as content. Lay preachers should speak with humility, acknowledging that many sincere Christians read the text differently, but inviting them to consider an interpretation that preserves both the centrality of Christ and the goodness of Sabbath rest.

Conclusion

In sum, the theological extraction of Colossians 2:16 points to Christ-centred freedom: the believers' ultimate allegiance is to Jesus, not to any shadow of the law. For Ghanaian lay preachers, this means anchoring all ministry in the Gospel narrative. They preach sermons and lead classes that tell the biblical "story" of God's salvation, they teach to rightly distinguish types from substance, they engage other Christians with grace and scriptural clarity, and they foster communities transformed from within by Christ. In other words, their theology becomes an enacted theology, an embodied drama of God's grace, so that the local church truly participates in God's ongoing redemptive performance.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study set out to revisit one short but heavily contested phrase in Paul's letter to the Colossians, *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16, and to ask how a fresh exegesis of the text might resource lay preachers in the Central Ghana Conference. The work was motivated by both the wider scholarly debate and the researcher's own pastoral experience, in which Colossians 2:16 repeatedly surfaced in evangelistic campaigns and radio Bible programmes as a proof-text against the continuing validity of the Sabbath.

Chapter One introduced the problem, framed the research questions, and clarified the purpose and delimitations of the study. It asked how the historical and literary context of Colossians supports a particular reading of *sabbatōn* in 2:16, how that term relates to the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue, whether Paul's paraenesis is merely situational or carries enduring force for Christians, and what pastoral guidance can be distilled for lay preachers. The study was deliberately limited to Paul's discourse in Colossians 2:16, with brief but focused engagement with Old Testament and Second Temple passages that share the "festival-new moon-Sabbaths" pattern. A historical-grammatical approach was adopted, not as a neutral technique, but as a method consciously grounded in the authority of Scripture and attentive to the movement from "what it meant" to "what it means" in the life of the church.

Chapter Two surveyed the major streams of scholarship on *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16. It traced the lexical range of the term in the New Testament and Septuagint, examined the Old Testament and Second Temple background of the “festival-new moon-Sabbaths” formula, and mapped the competing reconstructions of the Colossian “philosophy.” The literature reveals broad agreement that *sabbatōn* normally denotes the Sabbath, that Paul’s triad echoes Israel’s full calendar of sacred times, and that Colossians 2:16-23 engages a complex mix of identity-markers, ascetic discipline, and mystical experience. Points of tension remain over whether *sabbatōn* here refers only to ceremonial sabbaths, to the weekly Sabbath in its sacrificial dimension, or to Sabbath observance more generally, and over how the “shadow/substance” metaphor should be applied. The chapter also noted emerging post-supersessionist readings that seek to honour the Jewish roots of sacred time while affirming the centrality of Christ.

Chapter Three turned to a detailed exegesis of Colossians 2:16 within its historical and literary context. After situating the letter in a mixed Jewish-Gentile congregation in the Lycus Valley, facing pressure from a syncretistic teaching that combined elements of Jewish Torah observance, local folk religion, ascetic practices, and concern for spiritual powers, the chapter read 2:16-17 as part of Paul’s pastoral response to that situation. Paul’s admonition, “Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,” is closely linked to his preceding portrayal of believers’ death and resurrection with Christ and his triumph over the “principalities and powers” at the cross (2:11-15). The study argued that the phrase “festival, new moon, sabbaths” intentionally evokes Old Testament patterns, especially texts such as Ezekiel 45:17 and Numbers 28-29, where these sacred times function as occasions for a structured system of daily, weekly, monthly, and annual

sacrifices. In this light, the “shadows” of 2:17 are best understood as the cultic and sacrificial practices bound to those times rather than as the mere existence of sacred time itself.

Within that framework, *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 is read as part of a calendrical and ritual complex that opponents were using as a basis for judgment and spiritual one-upmanship. The chapter drew on Gien and others to distinguish between the Sabbath as a creation memorial and covenant sign, and the sacrificial system attached to festivals, new moons, and sabbaths that prefigured Christ’s atoning work. While recognising the force of alternative readings, the exegesis concluded that Paul’s critique falls primarily on the shadow-function of the sacrificial system and on the misuse of sacred times as boundary-markers, not on the weekly Sabbath as such. The link to Colossians 2:18-23 and 3:1-17 further showed that the heart of the apostle’s concern is to re-centre the community on Christ, in whom believers already share fullness, rather than on “regulations” that have only an appearance of wisdom and cannot restrain the flesh.

Chapter Four drew this exegesis into conversation with the lived concerns of lay preachers in the Central Ghana Conference. On the theological level, it argued that a careful reading of Colossians 2:16 neither abolishes the seventh-day Sabbath nor supports legalistic enforcement of calendar observance. Instead, it frames Sabbath and other sacred times within a Christ-centred theology of salvation history: the sacrifices and ritual food and drink associated with Israel’s calendar have reached their fulfilment in Christ, while the Sabbath as memorial of creation and redemption continues to invite the church into rest, worship, and service shaped by the gospel. On the pastoral level, the chapter suggested ways in which lay preachers can handle Colossians 2:16 responsibly in preaching, Bible studies, and evangelism: by

explaining the text in context, avoiding proof-texting, addressing common objections with patience, and presenting the Sabbath as a gift grounded in grace rather than a badge of superiority. It also highlighted the need for ongoing training in basic exegesis, so that lay preachers can move confidently from the biblical text to contextualised proclamation in the Ghanaian setting.

Together, these chapters show that a narrow proof-text approach to Colossians 2:16 is inadequate. Only when the text is read within its wider canonical, historical, and pastoral horizons can it speak fruitfully to contemporary questions about Sabbath, Christian freedom, and the task of lay preaching.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the meaning of *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16, its relationship to the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue, the nature of Paul's paraenetic instruction, and the pastoral implications for lay preachers in the Central Ghana Conference. The exegetical analysis, considering historical background, literary context, lexical usage, and intertextual parallels, allows the study to answer the central questions posed in the Statement of Problem.

1. The historical and cultural portrait of Colossae reveals a mixed Jewish-Gentile congregation pressured by teachers advocating a syncretistic mixture of Jewish ritualism, ascetic regulations, and mystical spirituality. Paul's focus in Colossians 2:6-23 is not primarily on sacred time itself but on a system of ritual observances used as criteria for spiritual judgment. The triad "festival, new moon, Sabbaths" rests on a well-attested Old Testament pattern tied to sacrificial offerings. Within this framework, *sabbatōn* functions as part of a ritual calendar whose sacrificial rites served as "shadows" pointing forward to Christ. Thus, the context

supports understanding *sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16 as a cultic-ceremonial category, not as a neutral reference to weekly rest.

2. The study concludes that while the weekly Sabbath can appear in the “festival-new moon-Sabbaths” formula, Paul’s argument in Colossians 2:16-17 targets those aspects of sacred time that were linked to the sacrificial system and food-and-drink offerings, the elements he explicitly identifies as “shadows.” The weekly Sabbath, in its creation-based and covenantal identity, is not a shadow of Christ’s atonement in the same way ceremonial sabbaths were. Consequently, *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 is related to the weekly Sabbath not by identity of meaning, but by overlap in function within Israel’s cultic life. Paul critiques the ritual features of these days, not the moral or creational principle embedded in the seventh-day Sabbath itself.

3. The study finds a dual dimension. Paul’s instruction is functional in that it addresses a concrete pastoral crisis in Colossae: believers were being condemned for not adopting a set of ritualised practices associated with food, drink, festivals, and sabbaths. Yet the theological principles underlying the instruction are normative for the church in every age: that Christ is the full “substance” of salvation, that no ritual system can confer spiritual status, and that judgmentalism grounded in external observances is incompatible with the gospel. Thus, while the specific Colossian error may not be replicated exactly today, Paul’s words continue to instruct Christians not to let ritual performance, including sabbath-related practices, become a means of spiritual superiority or a substitute for the sufficiency of Christ.

4. The findings of the study yield several pastoral directives. First, lay preachers must address Colossians 2:16 directly and confidently, situating it within Paul’s full argument rather than isolating the verse. Second, they should teach the Sabbath Christologically, presenting it as a creation gift fulfilled, not nullified, in

Christ, and avoiding both legalism and antinomianism. Third, in the Ghanaian context, where spiritual fears, ritualistic impulses, and syncretistic pressures often shape religious life, preachers must emphasise Paul's message that Christ has disarmed the powers and that salvation does not depend on ritual strictness. Finally, they must be equipped to guide members in reading Scripture contextually, resisting tendencies to weaponise isolated verses in debates about sacred days. By embracing these principles, lay preachers in the Central Ghana Conference can effectively guide their congregations in living out the teachings of Colossians 2:16 in a way that honours Christ and fosters spiritual growth.

The study has sought to model a way of reading Colossians 2:16 that is exegetically careful, theologically sensitive, and pastorally grounded. If it enables lay preachers in the Central Ghana Conference to handle this contested text with greater confidence, humility, and clarity, and if it helps them lead their congregations into a deeper, Christ-centred experience of Sabbath rest and Christian freedom, then it will have served its intended purpose.

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