Book review of Judging the Sabbath: discovering what can't be found in Colossians 2:16

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Book Review of Ron Du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath: Discovering What Can’t Be Found in Colossians 2:16*


Colossians 2:16 has been interpreted by the vast majority of scholars as evidence that the seventh-day Sabbath has been abolished and is no longer a day Christians need to observe. Sabbatarians, however, see this text as referring to the Old Testament ceremonial sabbaths that Christians are no more obliged to keep — not to the seventh day Sabbath. The author of *Judging the Sabbath* critically analyzes the “anti-Sabbatarian apologetics.” (viii) He supports his conclusions through an extensive analysis of the terms “festival,” “new moon,” and “sabbath” with helpful diagrams. Four extensive appendices provide a wealth of data from his research, again arranged in diagrams. An index of authors and texts concludes the book.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is for “educated lay persons and seminary-trained pastors;” the second part is oriented more to “the professional scholar of biblical studies and languages.” (x)
The author begins this study with a short historical overview of the interpretations of Colossians 2:16 and provides the rationale for his analytical textual approach. He admits that in order to get a full understanding of this text it would require a detailed understanding of wider questions about the book of Colossians, such as its main purpose, and the heresies Paul is combating. The author cites some recent scholars who, because of the lack of unanimity in NT scholarship, express doubts about the possibility of understanding these questions and the heresy that Paul was trying to combat. (5-7) Consequently, the author proposes to concentrate his study on the text itself and follow the rule that “Scripture is its own best interpreter.” (7) For his approach he proposes to study the text with an “inter-textual, semantic, hermeneutical approach, allowing Scripture to interpret itself” (90) which avoids “extra-biblical reconstructions, assumptions, or speculations.” (8) From this perspective, the author investigates each of the major arguments built upon this text by proponents in favor of the abolition of the seventh-day Sabbath. The following are some of the significant findings of his approach that support the view that the text warns believers against those insisting that it is necessary to continue observing the OT ceremonial rest days.

The author begins his approach by investigating the view that the word “sabbath” in Colossians 2:16 cannot refer to ceremonial sabbaths because this word by itself is never used in the OT for such sabbaths. (17) From an extensive textual analysis, with help of syntactical and linguistic markers of the 111 occurrences of “sabbath” in the OT, he concludes that in 94 instances this word refers to the seventh-day Sabbath. However, in 17 instances the word can refer to the Day of Atonement, or weeks, or Sabbatical Years. (23). Thus he notes that sabbata in Colossians 2:16 could mean ceremonial sabbaths.
The author’s further analysis of the free-standing Hebrew word for “sabbath” and its Greek equivalent *sabbata* in the Septuagint reveal that it was also used for the Day of Atonement, for sabbatical years, and, in some Greek manuscripts, for the Day of Trumpets. (51) These findings, the author says, need to be taken into account to arrive at the best translation of *sabbata* in Colossians 2:16.

In response to the argument that of the sixty times the word “Sabbath” is used in the NT, fifty-nine times it clearly refers to the seventh-day Sabbath, and thus it should be obvious that its use in Colossians 2:16 should also mean the seventh-day Sabbath, the author engages in a statistical analysis of the Greek terms *sabbaton* and *sabbata*. His findings are that these terms appear a total of 69 times in the NT. Fifty-nine times they refer to the seventh-day Sabbath. Of the ten remaining instances, nine are translated as “week.” The one still to be indentified is *sabbata* in Colossians 2:16. Because of the lack of any well-recognized linguistic markers and clear contextual indicators, the author concludes that it would appear that here the Greek term refers to something different than the seventh-day Sabbath or week.

In dealing with the assumption that all the ceremonial sabbaths are included in the term “festival” in Colossians 2:16, and therefore, the term “sabbath” must refer to the seventh-day Sabbath, the author presents compelling arguments from the Hebrew that this term refers to the three great sacred joyful festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. This pattern he sees supported by the Septuagint translation of the religious festivals. By contrast, the Day of Atonement and the blowing of the trumpets, both being ceremonial sabbaths, are not referred to as festivals or feasts. These differences among ceremonial sabbaths, the author observes, justify why the text makes
a distinction between “festival” and “sabbath,” pointing to a two-fold division of ceremonial sabbaths. Thus the term “festival” he relegates to the joyful pilgrim festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, while the word “sabbath” comprises the other ceremonial occasions of the blowing of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Sabbatical Years. (72-78)

As nearly all commentators viewed the three terms of “feast day,” “new moon,” and “sabbath” in Colossians 2:16 as a description of a yearly, monthly, and weekly calendar sequence, summarizing Israel’s feasts prescribed in the Torah, the author investigated 110 Bible commentaries as to how they came to this conclusion. The texts supporting this view were 1 Chron. 23:30, 31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 8:13; 31:3; Neh. 10:33; Ezek. 45:17; and Hosea 2:11. It is assumed that Paul used this same calendar cycle, and as the seventh-day Sabbath is part of the weekly cycle, so it is part of Colossians 2:16. The author’s thorough investigation found that of ninety-two commentaries commenting on this text since 1861, none did any “serious exegesis” of these three terms. (56-58) He observed that none of the OT passages have the same progression as in Colossians, and the same nature. Instead, these passages deal with sacrifices and not with actual days. Therefore, none of these OT texts can legitimately be used to support the view that Paul was using these texts in Colossians.

The author concludes his arguments in favor of the idea that in Colossians 2:16 Paul was referring to the Mosaic ceremonial services because he described these services as a “shadow of things to come.” All these ceremonies were a “shadow” or a “foreshadowing” of that what was to come, namely Christ. And when Christ came, the ceremonial rest days came to an end, not the seventh-day. The author, therefore,
concludes that any view that this text refers to the abolition of the seventh-day Sabbath is invalid.

The second part of the book the author wrote especially for scholars, and deals with the use of the OT in Paul’s epistles. Here he makes a case for Paul’s use of Hosea 2:11 in his letter to the Colossians. In the rest of part two, the author analyzes the linguistics and literary structure of Hosea 2:11. He sees evidence that the three-part phrase, “her festival, her new moon, and her sabbath” forms a chiastic structure. The word “festival” he refers to the three annual joyous festivals, while the term “sabbath” alludes to the three non-seventh-day religious occasions (annual Trumpets, Atonement, and Sabbatical Years), not the seventh-day Sabbath. (111, 125, 146) Then he analyzes the literary structure of Colossians 2:16 and concludes that the phrase “festival, new moon, and sabbath” is also part of a chiastic structure. He commented that if Paul was quoting the OT, he would “most likely have chosen to use the phrase from Hosea 2:11 in Colossians 2:16.” (136) The author finishes his research with the observation that both parts of the book bring out that “the compelling weight of inter-textual, linguistic, semantic, structural, and contextual evidence demonstrates that the sabbata of Colossians 2:16 refers to the ancient Jewish ceremonial sabbaths, and not the weekly Sabbath.” (148) Thus, he states, this text cannot be used as evidence that the seventh-day Sabbath of the Decalogue has been abolished.

The author’s inter-textual hermeneutical approach has led to some very valuable findings about the meanings of the single words of “festival,” “new moon,” and “sabbath” of Colossians 2:16 that should be seriously paid attention to. However, I do not think this unique approach fully identifies the significance of the expression
“festival, new moon, or sabbath.” The fact that NT scholarship is not united on the context of Colossians, the issues Paul is fighting against, and the Colossian heresy, is no excuse that we should not carefully study these aspects unless we a priori assume that all views on the type of conflict Paul is dealing with are wrong.

The author is very critical of the exegesis practiced by eighty-eight commentaries with different hermeneutical perspectives. From his analysis he finds that nearly half of them did not engage in exegesis, the others practiced some exegesis, while none of them did any exegesis of these vital three terms. (56) He discovered four commentaries that interpreted the “sabbath” in Colossians 2:16 as ceremonial sabbaths but again these “nowhere engage in any serious exegesis of the crucial three terms.” (57) Unfortunately the author nowhere defines what he means by “exegesis,” so it is difficult to evaluate the validity of his criticism.

Exegesis, as it is generally defined, includes questions of the intention of the writer, the understanding of the message by the original audience, and the issues the document tries to settle, all of which impact the outcome of the interpretation of the text. Paul’s strong exhortation and caution in Colossians 2:13-17 did not take place in a vacuum but in a powerful conflict with opponents he most likely has been facing in other places. In Galatians 4:10, 11 and Romans 14:5, 6 Paul also dealt with the issue of observance of days and times. A study of these challenges could provide further support of the author’s arguments. But simply criticizing the exegesis of others while avoiding the contextual and exegetical study of the text in the immediate and larger context of Colossians and other Pauline letters because there are so many different interpretations is no reason not to address it.
With this minor criticism, I fully recommend this book for anyone who likes to be informed with the latest research on one of the most challenging texts of the Letter to the Colossians.

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