

The Lord's Victory, Col 2:13, Spiritual Circumcision; Christ Cancels Our Certificate of Debt: Isagogics of the 1st-Century "Note of Hand" & the Chi Cancelation, v. 14

- 15) Paul reveals the details of our Lord's magnificent victory over our spiritual death through His cancelation of our debt on the cross:

Colossians 2:13 - When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, [NASB]

- (1) The cosmic threat to the church at Colossae was the false teaching of Gnosticism which did not believe Christ was God but rather viewed Him as a minor deity. Gnosticism claimed a unique and esoteric knowledge of metaphysical things that an "outsider" did not have the ability to understand.
- (2) The Greek word for "knowledge": **γνῶσις (gnōsis)**, defined this group and its claims. Paul however, takes up the issue of the deity of Christ in Colossians 1 and coins the word **ἐπίγνωσις (epignōsis)**: "full knowledge" which supersedes the human-viewpoint thinking of the Gnostics.
- (3) Paul's appeal to the Colossian church is to reject this deception (2:8) and instead subscribe to the doctrine of the hypostatic union (2:9).
- (4) He then takes up the work of Christ removing the power of the sin nature, illustrated by circumcision. Physical circumcision was first performed by Abraham which commemorated his genetic conversion from a Gentile to a Jew. The surgical removal of his foreskin was testimony that he was a new racial species and therefore Isaac became the first natural-born Jew.
- (5) Circumcision also referred to the Jews spiritual life identifying them with the Mosaic Law and service to God. Jews were not only a new racial species but also God's chosen people committed to the ritual plan of God.
- (6) Paul uses this ritual circumcision to illustrate the difference between the unbeliever and the believer. The unbeliever is described as being spiritually uncircumcised due to the presence of the sin nature in the flesh (2:13).
- (7) The believer is described as being spiritually circumcised due to the work of Christ on the cross. By faith in Christ the power of the flesh is broken, the sin nature is disempowered. The believer becomes a new spiritual species (2:11).

- (8) This illustration references the sin nature being cast off as useless flesh through faith in Christ. Verse 13 reminds the Colossians that they were previously dead in their sins, their bodies uncircumcised by the presence of the sin nature, but at salvation the sin nature was circumcised, they were freed from the slave market of sin and imputed eternal life.

Colossians 2:13 - And as for you, being dead [**spiritually**] by means of your trespasses and by the uncircumcision from your flesh [**old sin nature**], having graciously forgiven us all our trespasses, He has given you life [**eternal**] together with Him,

- (9) How this transition was accomplished is the subject of the next verse:

Colossians 2:14 - having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. [NASB]

- (1) This verse begins with the aorist active participle of the verb **ἐξαλείφω** (*exaleiphō*): “having canceled out.” The aorist tense is culminative meaning this cancelation is effective for the entire human race while the participle denotes it was accomplished once for all. This universal cancelation occurred on the cross.
- (2) What has been canceled is a “certificate of debt,” the neuter singular noun **χειρόγραφον** (*cheirographon*) which is a written bond or note indicating one’s indebtedness to another. Adolf Deissmann provides some insight from ancient literature:

The sins of men are laid upon the cross, as, in a court of law, a debt of money is removed from one and laid upon another. ... the writer intends merely to establish the fact that Christ in His death has removed the sins of men. The nerve of the striking image which he employs lies in the correlative idea that the sins of men lie no more upon them. The metaphor in Col. 2:14 ... is in perfect harmony with the above: Christ has taken the **χειρόγραφον**, drawn up against mankind, out of the way, nailing it to the cross. (p. 91)

The technical signification *bond, certificate of debt*, authenticated in reference to Col. 2:14 by Thayer in Plutarch and Artemidorus \ärt-a-ma-dör'-as\ is very common in the papyri [p. 668]. Many of the original **χειρόγραφα**, indeed, have been preserved; some of these are scored through and thus cancelled. (p 247).¹

- (3) A *cheirographon* called the “Note of Hand” for 100 silver drachmae was discovered in El Faiyûm \fî-yüm'\, Egypt, a region rich in archaeological objects and papyri.

¹ G. Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies: Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions to the History of the Language, the Literature, and the Religion of Hellenistic Judaism and Primitive Christianity*, trans. Alexander Grieve (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 91, 247.

- (4) Deissmann provides background information on the first-century historicity of the *cheirographon* in this excerpt:

There are plenty of original documents on papyrus to teach us the nature of an ancient *acknowledgment of debt* (One technical expression, among others, for a memorandum of debt is the word χειρόγραφον, “hand-writing,” “a writing by hand,” which is also used for other private contracts.). A large number of ancient notes of hand have been published among the Berliner Griechische Urkunden, and probably every other collection of papyri contains some specimens. A stereotyped formula in these documents is the promise to pay back the borrowed money, “I will repay”; and they all are in the debtor’s own hand (Hence the technical name “note of hand.”).

Some ancient customs connected with the law of debt must be at the root of the celebrated passage in Colossians 2:14 where the technical expression “handwriting” [i.e., “certificate of debt”: χειρόγραφον] is employed in a religious sense and brought into a remarkable connexion with the cross. Christ, says the apostle, has forgiven us all the debts incurred by our trespasses. Then, with a piling-up of cognate metaphors, the writer continues:— “Having blotted out the handwriting ... that was against us ... He has taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross.”

We have learnt from the new texts that it was generally customary to cancel a bond (or other document) by crossing it out with the Greek cross-letter Chi (Χχ). In the splendid Florentine papyrus of the year 85 A.D. the governor of Egypt gives this order in the course of a trial:—

“Let the handwriting [χειρόγραπτον] be crossed out.”

The same technical word, χιάζω [*chiazō*: to *cross out*, *cancel a document*?], “I cross out,” occurs in other similar contexts in papyri of New Testament age, but the Florentine passage is especially valuable as showing that the custom of crossing out was not a mere private one, but also official.³

- (5) Archaeological data are helpful in discerning the original intent of biblical writers. In Colossians 2:14, Paul uses multiple metaphors that communicate perfectly the cause-and-effect aspects of Christ’s work on the cross.
- (6) The work of Christ is said to “cancel out” (*exaleiphō*) a “certificate of debt” (*cheirographon*). As we have noted in our example, a written agreement is entered into by two parties: Party A, the lender, and Party B, the borrower. The obligation to repay is placed on Party B and if Party B fails to repay the debt then Party A has legal recourse against him.

² Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, comp., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.: “χιάζω.”

³ Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1927; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 331.

- (7) In Colossians 2:14, we are Party B. We owe God, Who is Party A, a debt. That debt is perfection which we can only achieve by the elimination of Adam's original sin plus all the sins that we commit in our lifetimes. It turns out that we cannot achieve perfection because we cannot eliminate these sin problems. Once imperfect, always imperfect.
- (8) If we are to acquire perfection, someone else, specifically someone who owes no debt, must pay our debt for us. If this is not accomplished, then we must submit to whatever recourse Party A demands. In our case it is eternal separation from God through incarceration in the lake of fire.