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BUT LET EVERYONE DISCERN
THE BODY OF CHRIST
(COLOSSIANS 2:17)

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The short clause τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ at the end of Col 2:17 is misunderstood by an exegetical tradition that ignores the grammatical structure of the clause in favor of a semantic antithesis between shadow (σκιὰ) and body (σῶμα).¹ Eduard Schweizer calls the construction obscure and suggests emending the genitive Χριστοῦ to a nominative so that the clause would corre-

¹ The completely negative assessment of the shadow conception among some commentators is not present in this text. Subtly shifting the antecedent of the relative pronoun at the beginning of v. 17 from practices to regulations or stipulations permits many commentators to interpret σκιὰ in an absolutely pejorative manner. The regulations or stipulations of the opponents are considered as worthless shadows. See Eduard Lohse (*Colossians and Philemon* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971] 117 n. 22). However, the opponents' regulations are not necessarily mentioned in v. 16, which may mention the practices of the Colossian community that are being critiqued. These Christian practices may comprise the shadow, and they are not presented negatively except by the opponents. Furthermore, some commentators subtly shift the tense of ἔστιν in the relative pronoun clause at the beginning of v. 17. The tense is present and affirms that these things are now shadows. These commentators translate the past tense and conclude that these stipulations have ended now that the true substance has arrived since they were only shadows. This shift of tense is evident when Lohse states, "The regulations are merely shadows of things to come. . . . Since reality is with Christ alone, the shadowy appearances have lost all right to exist. . . . The reality that exists solely with Christ is shared only by those who, as members of the body of Christ, adhere to the head (2:19). Therefore, for them the shadows have become completely meaningless, and the 'regulations,' to which the arrogant exponents of the 'philosophy' refer, have lost all binding force" (*Colossians*, 117). In spite of this eisegesis, the text affirms a present, albeit temporary, validity to the shadow. H. A. W. Meyer correctly argues, "The μέλλοντα have not yet been manifested at all, and belong altogether to the αἰὼν μέλλον, which will begin with the coming again of Christ to set up His kingdom. . . . The μέλλοντα could only be viewed as having already set in either in whole or in part, if ἦν and not ἔστι were used previously, and thereby the notion of futurity were to be taken relatively, in reference to a state of things then already past" (*Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1875] 387). Petr Pokorný (*Colossians* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991] 144) concurs with Meyer. Although Meyer and Pokorný correctly understand the temporal reference, they do not understand its significance, since they insist on associating σκιὰ with the opponents' practices.

spond "precisely to the usual contrast between shadow and substance."² His emendation, which has no textual support, demonstrates the importance of the antithesis between shadow and body for the interpretation of this clause. Schweizer concludes his interpretation by saying, "However one understands this phrase grammatically, the meaning at least is clear."³ His conclusion shows the irrelevance of the grammar for his interpretation. Schweizer should not be criticized too harshly, since he merely follows the exegetical tradition he has received. At least, his recognition of the grammatical problems inherent in the text surpasses many other exegetes. In order to remove the misunderstanding of this clause, an adequate explanation of its grammar and syntax is needed.

The first exegetical issue that demands resolution is the syntactical relationship of this clause to its larger sentence. This clause occurs at the end of a sentence that begins in Col 2:16. The Greek text of this sentence reads as follows: Μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω ἐν βρώσει καὶ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νεομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων, ἃ ἔστιν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων, τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ. The critical exegetical tradition almost unanimously connects the last clause in the sentence with the relative clause that immediately precedes it because of the contrast between σκιά and σῶμα.

For example, Peter T. O'Brien interprets the clause τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ as a nominal clause with an ellipsed ἔστιν. He connects this clause syntactically to the subordinate relative clause ἃ ἔστιν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων because of the semantic connection between σκιά and σῶμα.⁴ He then adopts the NIV's translation, which reads, "These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."⁵ O'Brien's grammatical analysis does not support his preferred translation. He identifies the construction as a compound subordinate clause but shifts to independent clauses in order to translate the construction. O'Brien's error is shared by virtually every other commentator.

This interpretive error is caused by forcing a coordinating conjunction to connect two clauses that are not grammatically equivalent. When it is used to connect clauses, the coordinating conjunction δέ can only connect clauses of the same type.⁶ When the clause τὸ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ is understood as a nominal clause with an ellipsed ἔστιν, then it becomes an independent clause. Syntactically, a coordinating conjunction cannot link this independent clause with the subordinate relative clause ἃ ἔστιν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων. In order to con-

² Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1962) 157.

³ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴ Peter T. O'Brien states, "But the sentence can be understood more simply by referring it to the shadow/substance contrast alone" (*Colossians, Philemon* [WBC 44; Waco: Word, 1982] 141).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁶ According to BDF §438, the conjunction δέ is always coordinating, and coordinating conjunctions are "those which connect elements in sentence structure which are on a par with each other."

nect these two clauses, O'Brien and others interpret the subordinate relative clause as an independent clause. This interpretation contradicts the grammatical construction of the text, which clearly contains both a subordinate and an independent clause. Thus, his connection of the concluding independent nominal clause with the preceding dependent relative clause is impossible grammatically because in this clause δέ is a coordinating conjunction that can only connect grammatical equivalents.

If the clause introduced by δέ is connected with the relative clause as the commentators insist, then τὸ σῶμα in this clause must be a predicate nominative with the relative pronoun ἃ as its subject. Since σκιά also serves as a predicate nominative for this pronoun, τὸ σῶμα would form a compound predicate nominative with σκιά. The translation would read, "which things are a shadow of the things to come but which things are the body of Christ." The relative pronoun's antecedents, the food and temporal references in v. 16, would then be equated with the body of Christ.⁷ This equation is nonsensical, since the eating and drinking and the temporal references are not likely both the shadow and the body at one and the same time. Therefore, the clause τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ does not connect with the relative clause that precedes in spite of the overwhelming consensus of modern commentators.

In contrast to the explanation offered by the commentators, the scribal tradition in the manuscripts often places a full stop after μελλόντων and takes τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ as the direct object of the following verb καταβραβεύετω in 2:18. Ian A. Moir has championed this understanding in more recent times, and he translates the construction, "But (or 'see that you') let no one deprive you of / defraud you of / do you out of / exclude you from /

⁷ The majority of commentators understand the criticisms both of food and of time in v. 16 as the antecedent to the relative pronoun ἃ. For example, H. von Soden comments on this pronoun in 2:17, saying, "Was (nicht nur auf die Zeiten, sondern auch auf die Speiseordnungen zu beziehen; die Relativsatz gibt in Form einer Aussage über jene Dinge eine Begründung der Forderung: μή τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω)" (*Der Brief an die Kolosser* [HKNT 3; Freiburg: Akademische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1891] 52). See also Johannes Lähnemann, who says, "daß der 'Schatten des Kommanden' die in 2,16 angedeuteten Gebote kennzeichnen soll" (*Der Kolosserbrief* [SNT 3; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1971] 136). Others, like Paul Ewald, argue that the antecedent is limited to the temporal references because only these pertain to the Jewish law, which was a shadow of the things to come (*Der Brief an die Kolosser* [Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 10; Leipzig: Deichert, 1905] 392). Grammatically, either interpretation is possible. However, the conjunction ἢ primarily indicates disjunction, not contrast, and consequently is not able to bear the weight that Ewald and others put on it. If the Colossian author explicitly intended a contrast between the eating and temporal references, a contrasting construction like μέν . . . δέ instead of the coordinating conjunction ἢ would be necessary. Furthermore, the variant reading in some manuscripts of a singular pronoun instead of the plural pronoun indicates that several early Christian scribes understood the entire preceding verse as the antecedent for the pronoun ἃ. For these reasons, it is best to include both the temporal and the food regulations as the antecedents for this pronoun as the majority of commentators do. See J. B. Lightfoot (*Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* [Zondervan Commentary Series; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979] 195).

the body of Christ."⁸ This suggestion is appealing because it recognizes the integrity of δέ as a coordinating conjunction and understands τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ as an accusative direct object.

Moir himself, however, expresses hesitation about this interpretation because it requires the extremely unlikely construal of καταβραβεύετω with two accusatives.⁹ In addition to this objection, Moir and the scribal tradition's explanation of the syntax destroys the parallelism between μὴ . . . κρινέτω and μηδεὶς . . . καταβραβεύετω. It also results in a strange parenetic construction in which two negated imperatives are connected by δέ. In the usual parenetic construction, the coordinating conjunction δέ contrasts a positive imperative with a negative one. Consequently, τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ should not be construed with the verb καταβραβεύετω in 2:18, and the critical texts correctly place a full stop after Χριστοῦ.

Since the prepositional phrases in 2:16 cannot be grammatically equivalent to this independent clause either, the only remaining grammatical option is to connect τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ with the independent clause μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω at the beginning of the sentence. This conclusion resolves the first exegetical issue of the syntactical relationship of τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ to the overall sentence. However, this conclusion generates the second exegetical issue of how the two independent clauses in this antithetical compound sentence relate to one another.

The construction μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω . . . τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ is an antithesis. The negative member is stated first; the contrasting positive member introduced by an adversative conjunction occurs second. Obviously, there is an ellipsis in the second member. All the commentators supply the ellipsed verb ἐστίν, which is a possibility since this verb can be ellipsed at any time. The resulting translation reads, "Therefore, let no one judge you . . . but the body (substance) belongs to Christ." As this translation demonstrates, supplying the verb ἐστίν in the second member does not produce a clause that is antithetical to the previous one. Whatever such a statement might mean, it is not an antithesis. Another option is required.

A common ellipsis in antitheses occurs when the verb of the first member is not repeated in the second member.¹⁰ A clear example is 1 Cor 10:24, which reads, "Μηδεὶς τὸ ἑαυτοῦ ζητεῖτω ἀλλὰ τὸ τοῦ ἑτέρου." The imperative ζητεῖτω belongs to both members even though it is absent from the second, and the verse translates, "Let no one seek her or his own benefit, but *let everyone seek* the benefit of another." Except for the absence of οὖν and the substi-

⁸ Ian A. Moir, "Some Thoughts on Col. 2,17-18," *TZ* 35 (1979) 363-65. See also his earlier discussion in his article "The Bible Societies' Greek New Testament," edited by Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Bruce M. Metzger and Allen Wikgren, *NTS* 14 (1967) 142.

⁹ Moir, "Some Thoughts," 365. For additional problems with Moir's interpretation, see Robert H. Cundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 42-43.

¹⁰ This is a good classical construction according to BDF §479.1.

tution of ἀλλά for δέ, this verse is grammatically parallel to the antithesis in Col 2:16–17. This example from Corinthians indicates that perhaps the verb κρινέτω is ellipsed in the second member of the antithesis in Colossians.

When this ellipsed verb is supplied, the antithesis in Col 2:16–17 reads, μή οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω . . . τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ κρινέτω. The antithesis is formed by the negative adverb μή in the first member and the adversative conjunction δέ in the second. The accusative personal pronoun ὑμᾶς and the accusative neuter noun σῶμα function as the direct objects of the first and second members respectively.¹¹ The verb κρινέτω determines the action that is forbidden by the first member and then enjoined by the second member of this antithesis. This explanation of the relationship between the two independent clauses of this antithesis leads to a third exegetical issue; namely, the meaning of the verb κρινέτω in each clause.

From its basic meaning of *to part* or *to sift*, the verb κρίνω develops a number of different nuances including *dividing, selecting, deciding, discerning, determining, valuing, assessing, and judging*.¹² Some of these nuances are positive or neutral while others are negative. The prohibition in the first clause of the antithesis in Col 2:16 indicates that the nuance of κρινέτω is negative. Hence, the nuance of judging or criticizing is probably the best selection. However, the action enjoined by the second clause requires a positive nuance. Consequently, the nuance of deciding or discerning is the best option here. An example of precisely this combination of nuances occurs in the antithesis in Rom 14:13, which reads, Μηκέτι οὖν ἀλλήλους κρίνωμεν· ἀλλὰ τοῦτο κρίνατε μᾶλλον. . . . It translates as follows, "Let us no longer judge (κρίνωμεν) one another, but rather determine (κρίνωμεν) this. . . ."¹³ These same nuances occur in the antithesis found in Col 2:16–17, where κρινέτω in the first clause of the antithesis refers to judging and in the second clause to discerning.

This type of ellipsis, where the meaning of the ellipsed word changes from the meaning of its nonellipsed occurrence, is a common type of ellipsis. For example, Socrates says in his own defense, "I did not care for the things that most people care about (ἀμελήσας ὥνπερ οἱ πολλοὶ [ἐπιμελοῦνται])."¹⁴ Socrates' description of his own action as ἀμελέω indicates that some form of this verb with a different nuance should be supplied to describe the actions of the people with whom Socrates contrasts himself. Herbert Weir Smyth comments, "From a preceding word its opposite must often be supplied, especially

¹¹ Understanding σῶμα as an accusative is contrary to all the commentators who understand it as a nominative. Of course, it can be either according to its form. If my arguments regarding the grammar and syntax of this verse are correct, then σῶμα must be accusative, as the scribal tradition often indicates by its punctuation of this verse.

¹² Friedrich Büchsel, "κρίνω," *TDNT* 3, 922–23.

¹³ BAGD, 453.

¹⁴ Plato, *Laus* 36b. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Bollingen Series 71; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985) 21.

an affirmative after a negative.¹⁵ The shift in the nuances of κρινέτω in the two independent antithetical clauses of Col 2:16–17 is common in antithetical ellipses.

In addition to the shift in the meaning of κρινέτω, the subject of this verb needs clarification. In the first member of this antithesis, the subject of κρινέτω is specified as *no one* (μή τις). When a restrictive reference such as μηδείς or μή τις occurs in the first member of an antithesis, the following member takes an understood subject such as *everyone* (πᾶς) or *each* (ἕκαστος) that includes all persons excluded by the first subject.¹⁶ Demosthenes says, "No one should marvel at my extravagance toward Zeus and the gods, but let *everyone* favorably ponder what I say (καὶ μου πρὸς Διὸς καὶ θεῶν μηδείς τὴν ὑπερβολὴν θαυμάση, ἀλλὰ μετ' εὐνοίας ὁ λέγω θεωρησάτω)" (*De Corona* 199). The implied subject of θεωρησάτω is either πᾶς or ἕκαστος and *everyone* must be added to the English translation for the meaning to be clear.¹⁷ Thus, the subject of the ellipsed κρινέτω in the second clause in the antithesis in Col 2:16–17 is *everyone* or *each one*.

One further observation about Greek ellipsis bears on the understanding of the syntax of this antithesis in Col 2:16–17. Greek ellipsis occurs when two clauses are grammatically parallel. Only a few of the elements of the first clause are repeated in the second clause and the remaining parallel elements must be supplied. In the δέ clause, the direct object τὸ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ parallels the direct object ὑμᾶς in the first clause. Hence, everything following ὑμᾶς in the first clause from κρινέτω to μελλόντων should be supplied in the δέ clause.¹⁸

The resolution of the grammatical and syntactical problems of the clause τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ, supports the following translation of Col 2:16–17, "Therefore do not let anyone critique you by [*your or her/his?*] eating and drinking or by [*your or her/his?*] participation in a feast, a new moon, or sabbaths, which things are a shadow of future realities, but let *everyone discern* the body of Christ by [*your or her/his?*] eating and drinking or by [*your or her/his?*] participation in a feast, new moon, or sabbaths, which things are a shadow of future realities."

As this translation indicates, the determination of whose practices are being critiqued remains ambiguous even though the grammar and syntax of

¹⁵ H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) §3018m.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ 1 Cor 10:24, discussed and translated above, also illustrates this principle.

¹⁸ The preposition ἐν linked to the verb κρινέτω that has an accusative direct object designates the activity by which the direct object is condemned. Someone is attempting to condemn the Colossians either for their dietary practice or from the standpoint of the accuser's own practice of eating and drinking. Von Soden says on 2:16, "Richte in (ἐν bezeichnet das Gebeit, in welchem sich das Richten bewegt, vgl. Rm 2:1; 14:22)" (*An die Kolosser*, 51). More precisely, Wilhelm Steiger states, "Ev zeigt die Sphäre oder den Gegenstand an" (*Der Brief Pauli an die Kolosser* [Erlangen: Carl Heyder, 1835] 244).

this sentence have been explained. Some commentators attribute the eating and drinking to the Colossians, while others identify these practices with the opponents.¹⁹ Almost all commentators, however, attribute the time-keeping scheme to the opponents. The ambiguity in this passage arises because of another ellipsis. The author felt no need to supply the missing pronouns, since his readers knew perfectly well whose practices were being critiqued.²⁰ The definitive determination of which pronoun should be supplied depends on the identification of the opponents at Colossae. Since such an identification proceeds beyond the grammar and syntax of this passage, the determination of whose practices are being critiqued must await a further, more comprehensive study.²¹

Nevertheless, the preceding grammatical and syntactical investigation of the clause τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ in Col 2:17 suggests that the practices mentioned in 2:16 are those of the Colossian Christians and not the opponents. The eating and drinking associated with the Christian Eucharist certainly foreshadow future realities. Although the observance of νεομηνία is less certain, early Christians observe both feasts and sabbaths. If the practices in 2:16 are those of the Christians, then the humility and worship of angels in the parallel construction of 2:18 probably also represent Christian practices.

In future studies, exegetes should seriously consider the possibility that Christian practices, and not those of the opponents, are criticized in Col 2:16, 18. The exegetical tradition's failure to adequately consider the grammar and syntax of τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ in Col 2:17 results in a misunderstanding of this clause along with the whole of Colossians. In contrast, the preceding study of the grammatical structure coherently explains this clause in its immediate context and suggests new possibilities for the interpretation of Colossians as well.

¹⁹ It is significant that the words for eating and drinking here designate an activity. Lohse says, "The words 'eating' (βρώσις) and 'drinking' (πόσις) are to be distinguished from 'food' (βρῶμα) and 'drink' (πόμα)" (*Colossians*, 115 n. 4). If the eating and drinking are practices of the Colossian Christians, then a related idea of discerning the body of Christ through the Eucharist occurs in 1 Cor 11:29, which reads, "For the person who eats and drinks while not discerning (διακρίνων) the body eats and drinks judgment (κρίμα) to herself or himself."

²⁰ "Ellipses dependent on individual style and choice go much farther, especially in letters, where the writer can count on the knowledge which the recipient shares with himself and where he imitates ordinary speech" (BDF §481).

²¹ See my forthcoming book, "By Philosophy and Empty Deceit": *Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique* (Sheffield: Academic Press).