

## Colossian 2:6-19<sup>1</sup>

### Form/Structure/Setting

As he begins his interaction with the “philosophy” (φιλοσοφία) of the false teachers, the apostle admonishes the addressees to continue in the teaching they had received and to remain immovable in their faith (2:6, 7). These two verses, which summarize much of what has preceded (Lähnemann, *Kolossierbrief*, 49) and which lay the foundation for the attack on the Colossian heresy that follows, contain an introductory subordinate clause (v 6, ὡς οὖν παρελάβετε τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον, “so then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord”) and a longer principal clause (vv 6b, 7) consisting of an imperative, three participial expressions joined by καί (“and”), a parenthesis and a concluding participial expression (Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene*, 50; cf. Bujard, *Untersuchungen*, 74–76, 80–86, regarding the literary style of vv 6–15):

6b ἐν αὐτῷ περιπατεῖτε  
7a ἐρριζωνένοι  
b καὶ ἐποικοδομούμενοι ἐν αὐτῷ  
c καὶ βεβεαιούμενοι τῇ πίστει  
d —καθὼς ἐδιδάχθητε—  
e περισσεύοντες ἐ εὐχαπιστα  
 (“live in him  
rooted  
and built up in him  
and established in the faith  
—as you were taught—  
overflowing with thanksgiving.”)

At verse 8 the community is confronted with the first of several warnings that will demand of it clear, unequivocal decisions. The imperative βλέπετε (“beware”) is followed by what is, in effect, a sentence of prohibition and by using two sets of prepositional phrases in synonymous parallelism the means by which the false teachers intend to carry out their plan to ensnare the congregation is mentioned:

8b διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας  
c καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης  
d κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων  
e κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου  
 (“through philosophy  
and empty deceit  
according to the tradition of men

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<sup>1</sup>O'Brien, P. T. (2002). *Vol. 44: Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*. Word Biblical Commentary (102). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

cf. *confer*, compare

according to the elemental powers of the world.”)

The conclusion of the verse is brief and pungent, presenting a sharp antithesis to what has immediately preceded: καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν (“and not according to Christ”).

Verses 9 and 10, in which language from the hymn is taken up (ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κτλ.) spell out why (καί) the “philosophy” of the false teachers is “not according to Christ.” Two reasons are given in separate clauses, linked by καί (“and”), where there is a play on ἐν αὐτῷ (“in him”) and πλήρωμα (“fullness”):

ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς.

καὶ ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι,

ὅς ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας.

(“For *in him* the whole *fullness* of deity lives in bodily form, and you have been *filled in him*,

who is the head over every power and authority.”)

Paul continues (vv 11, 12) the theme of incorporation in Christ. Having mentioned that the readers have been “filled in him,” he elaborates on this by asserting that they have participated in Christ’s death, burial and resurrection:

ἐν ᾧ καὶ περιετμήθητε περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ ...

συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ...

ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε ...

(“In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, you were buried with him ...

in him you were also raised ...”

Verse 13 marks a change in the section. There is a switch in the subject from “you” to “he”; God has made you who were dead to be alive with Christ. Again a sharp contrast is drawn between the readers’ pre-Christian past (καὶ ὑμᾶς νεκροὺς ὄντας ... τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν, “also you who were dead ...”) and their present standing in Christ, brought about by God’s action (συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ, “he made you alive together with him”).

In the latter half of the verse there is a further change to “us” and “our” from “you” (i.e. from the second person to the first), and several scholars have concluded that verses 13c–15, in which traditional Christian formulations appear, are a fragment of a confession constructed in hymnic phrases which the author appropriated, since it clearly expressed for him the essential connection between the forgiveness of sins and victory over the principalities and powers (so Lohse, 106, 107; also *Einheit*, 276–84; cf. Martin, *Reconciliation*, 1974, 116–24).

Schille (*Hymnen*, 31–37; cf. Lohmeyer, 100–102) had previously argued that a redeemer or baptismal hymn underlay verses 9–15 but this view has been rejected even by those who detect hymnic elements in verses 13–15. Verses 9, 10b are not the beginning of a hymn (the ὅτι is causal, not recitative) but rather an explanatory resumption of chapter 1:15–20 (note the critiques of Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus*, 167–69, and Lohse, *Einheit*, 277–79). Wengst too (*Formeln*, 186–94) assumed that verses 13–15 were based on a continuous traditional piece. However, to demonstrate that the hymn consisted of three verses each containing three lines (vv 13, 14, 15) he

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i.e. *id est*, that is

is obliged to change the text (the “you” was originally “we” and the expression “the uncircumcision of your flesh” is dropped out), but these adjustments are not convincing.

Lohse’s structuring of the passage has the merit of drawing to our attention the relationship of the participles to the finite verbs in verses 14 and 15 (ἐξαλειψας ... ἤρκεν ... προσλώσας, “having canceled ... he took away ... nailing”; and ἀπεκδυσάμενος ... ἐδειγμάτισεν ... θπιαμβεύσας, “having disarmed ... he made a spectacle ... leading in his triumphal procession”), but this does not commit us to a hymnic confession underlying verses 13c–15. The linguistic argument is two-edged. For if the passage contains words that occur either rarely or nowhere else in the NT (cf. Lohse, 106) then it is unusual to speak of the author adopting “traditional formulations.” The problem of the source of these expressions remains, and it might as well have been Paul as some unknown disciple—at least he does use the verb υπιαμβεύω (2 Cor 2:14; he is the only NT writer to have done so).

Nevertheless verses 13c–15 are difficult to structure; in verse 13 a contrast is drawn: καὶ ὑμᾶς νεκροὺς ὄντας ... συνεζωοποίησεν, “and you who were dead ... he made alive.” The participle χαρισάμενος which introduces the statement about the forgiveness of sins is probably causal (though some have suggested it is explanatory, see the exegesis below), while each of the two finite verbs in verses 14 and 15 is preceded and followed by a participle (see above).

It remains to draw attention to the “in Christ (him)” motif which runs like a scarlet thread through the whole passage (the significance of which is assessed below): ἐν αὐτῷ (“in him,” vv 6, 7, 9, 10, 15); ἐν ᾧ (“in whom,” vv 11, 12; cf. αὐτῷ, “him,” v 12, and αὐτῷ, “with him,” v 13). That the paragraph should begin with this important phrase ἐν σὺν αὐτῷ and end on a similar note suggests we have an example of *inclusio*, i.e. the text closes on the same note as its beginning.