

COLOSSIANS 2:11-15 | A MESSAGE TO EACH AUDIENCE

In this analysis of verses 11-14, I am going to present an unconventional interpretation. I propose that verses 11-12 are directed towards the Jewish believers, while verses 13-14 are intended for the Gentile believers. This interpretation will be further substantiated as we delve deeper into the text. For now, it's worth noting that the imagery in verses 11-12 is distinctly Jewish, while the language in verses 13-14 is more fitting of a non-Jewish audience.

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VERSE 11 - BLACK

I am going to make the premise that discussing circumcision in the Greco-Roman world would be inappropriate. This is not due to some type of modesty implications, for the Greco-Roman world was far less modest than the Jewish world and even celebrated the physical body, particularly that of men. However, in the Greco-Roman context, circumcision was viewed as mutilation and would likely have been perceived as repulsive.

So, to suggest that this reference to circumcision was aimed at Gentiles in Colossae seems culturally insensitive. Paul may have been many things, but he was not one to disregard the cultural norms and sensitivities of his audience. Therefore, it is much more plausible that this verse was directed at Jewish believers.

Many interpretations suggest that Paul's mention of "the circumcision made without hands" refers to a "spiritual circumcision" rather than a physical one. However, I argue that this is a misinterpretation. In Jewish tradition, mere physical circumcision has often been criticized, and a spiritual circumcision was always required along with the physical. This idea is emphasized in scriptures such as Deuteronomy 10:16, which says, "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart," Deuteronomy 30:6, which declares, "And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart," and Romans 2:28-29, which states, "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart." These passages highlight that a "true Jew" undergoes both physical and spiritual circumcision.

On the other hand, I doubt there are any verses that suggest Gentile believers possess a "spiritual circumcision." My stance is that all circumcision, both physical and spiritual, pertains to Jews. In modern Christianity, we have a habit of spiritualizing texts, and we may have done so here, appropriating the concept of spiritual circumcision to ourselves when it may not be applicable.

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VERSE 12 - BLACK

Again, the standard interpretation of this verse is that it speaks of a spirit-baptism and not a water baptism. However, I propose that the "default" understanding of the word "baptism" has to be "with water." Unless the text specifies otherwise (as it sometimes does), then the baptism is a water baptism. If we remove this fundamental principle of conservative hermeneutics, we will bring irreparable harm to the faith. That is, if you can reinterpret (i.e.: spiritualize) "baptism" at-will, then you can do the same with words like "virgin," "resurrection," etc. We simply have to allow scripture to set its own rules, to be its own dictionary. So, just as a cup implies liquid unless otherwise made clear, so baptism involves liquid unless otherwise made clear (see Mark 10:38). In fact, if it were not for this bedrock hermeneutics principle, I would have taken verses 11-12 in a spiritual sense and therefore color-coded these as blue, directly for our application.

But, since I refuse to set aside the default definition of baptism, I have to put this into the realm of Judaism, in which baptism was required. Note that Colossae was in Phrygia, which was specifically mentioned in Acts 2:10, stating that people from Phrygia were present on the Day of Pentecost, where Peter required baptism (Acts 2:38).

Furthermore, it's important to note that Paul's gospel is not one of baptism. As he says in 1 Corinthians 1:17, "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." However, many who heard his message were already "buried with him in baptism," as it was a common practice among the followers of John the Baptist, Jesus, and Peter and the Apostles before Paul's revelation of the mystery.

These same individuals are also described as "risen with him through the faith of the operation of God," which refers to the faith that trusts in God's work in the resurrection. They had already undergone baptism, symbolizing their death and rebirth in Christ, and now they were being reminded of that experience.

If we decide to go with the standard interpretation and spiritualize these concepts of circumcision and baptism to fit the body of Christ into these verses, we're effectively erasing Israel's unique identity and taking their distinctive features for the church. If we can turn circumcision and baptism into matters of the heart, what's stopping us from doing the same with Israel's kingdom, transforming it into an internal, spiritual matter? The answer is clear: nothing. And indeed, the Christian world hasn't held back from doing just that. In fact, having taken Israel's circumcision, baptism, and kingdom, it quickly came to consider itself the "new Israel."

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#### VERSE 13 - BLUE

This verse speaks clearly (and directly) to those who are not only "dead in your sins" but also are uncircumcised in flesh. This circumstance is exclusive to Gentiles, as Jews would have been circumcised in the flesh as part of their religious tradition. Given this, it is reasonable to interpret this verse as directly addressing the Gentile population. Consequently, it stands to reason that in a letter addressing both Jewish and Gentile believers, there may be sections designed to speak specifically to each group. Given the distinctly Jewish imagery and language used in verses 11-12, it would make sense to interpret these verses as specifically addressing Jewish believers. This would create a balance in the text, with verses 11-12 speaking to Jewish believers and verse 13 speaking to Gentile believers.

In verse 13, Paul reassures the Gentile believers that, just like the Jewish believers, they too have been "quickenened" or brought to life by God. This act of quickening is equivalent to the "raising" experienced by Jewish believers, symbolizing a transition from spiritual death to life.

Furthermore, Paul states that these Gentile believers have been "forgiven...all trespasses." The word he uses for "forgiven" is *χαρίζομαι* (*charizomai*), which originates from the word "charis," meaning "grace." This suggests that the Gentile believers have not just been absolved of their sins, but have been graced — bestowed with an unmerited favor. They have received a gift they didn't earn: the grace of God, which forgives all their trespasses.

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#### VERSE 14 - BLUE

This verse appears to be even more focused on a Gentile audience. In fact, the words almost necessitate a dispensational change. There was a "handwriting of ordinances" that was "contrary to us." The "ordinances" are undoubtedly the Mosaic Law. For the Jewish people, the Law was largely seen as gracious and was highly praised (see Psalm 19:7-8, Psalm 119:97-98, Deuteronomy 30:19-20). For the Gentiles, it was "contrary" in that it clearly marked them as outsiders, "having no hope, and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

However, Paul subtly includes the Jews here, using the pronoun "us." The Law, even for the Jews, had a "contrary" nature (see Deuteronomy 27:26, for example). The contrary nature for the Jews was that the Law was their

"schoolmaster" to obey (Gal. 4:1-4). By using the first person plural "us," Paul unites the two groups (circumcised and uncircumcised). In Ephesians 2:14-15, Paul does this explicitly, speaking of the "middle wall of partition" (Eph. 2:14) that has been removed, which was "the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances" (Eph. 2:15).

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#### VERSE 15 - BLUE

Ending on a note of victory for both parties, Paul rejoices that the "principalities and powers" have been "spoiled." The word Paul uses literally means "stripped," and is a reference to a humiliating defeat in which the enemy is stripped of their clothing (as Christ was) and paraded through town in humiliation. This imagery of a triumphant victory over the powers of darkness serves as a powerful reminder of the absolute victory that Christ achieved through His death and resurrection. It is a victory that both Jewish and Gentile believers share.