

## EXEGETICAL BRIEF: Colossians 2:14 What Was Nailed to the Cross?

*Stephen H. Geiger*

Having canceled *the written code*, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 2:14—NIV 1984)

ἔξαλείφας τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν, καὶ αὐτὸ ἤρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ.

In Colossians 2, Paul addresses an issue prominent in Scripture and surely prominent in the human heart universally, the inclination to view obedience to God's law as meritorious and even salvific. In the process of presenting Christ as the ultimate in every respect, Paul describes the role of Christ's cross in bringing spiritual victory. Surprisingly, the imagery of crucifixion in Colossians 2 does not highlight the obvious, that it was Christ who hung on wood and died for sinners. Rather, Paul focuses on something else that was nailed to a tree: τὸ χειρόγραφον.

What is τὸ χειρόγραφον?

Most basically the term means "something written by hand," representing a combination of χεῖρ (hand) and γραφή (writing). The King James Version translates this term, which appears in the New Testament only in Colossians 2:14, in a most straightforward fashion: "the handwriting." NIV 1984 offers a bit more interpretative rendering, equating τὸ χειρόγραφον with "the written code," that is, all of God's revealed law (represented for Israel in the Sinaitic Code). Many other translations, however, including the NIV 2011 and ESV and HCSB,<sup>1</sup> offer another option. They translate τὸ χειρόγραφον as "the charge of our legal indebtedness" or "record of debt" or "certificate of debt."

What is the best way to translate τὸ χειρόγραφον?

James Dunn, in his *New International Greek Testament Commentary*, recommends understanding χειρόγραφον as a "certificate of indebtedness." He refers to James Moulton's and George Milligan's *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, a text published in 1930 that sought in particular to offer additional material for New Testament exegesis

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<sup>1</sup>New International Version 2011, English Standard Version, and Holman Christian Standard Bible

from recently uncovered papyri texts. In their article on τὸ χειρόγραφον, Moulton and Milligan cite Papyrus Oxyrhynchus VIII. 1132<sup>16</sup> (AD 162): τὸ δὲ κεφάλαιον δανεισθέν σοι ὑπ' ἐμοῦ κατὰ χειρόγραφ[ον], “the sum total loaned to you by me in accord with the handwritten document.” The handwritten document presumably included stipulations for the loan, but perhaps more important, it represented an implicit or explicit personal commitment to repay. This was a “certificate of indebtedness.”

Consider another example Dunn offers. He references an occasion in the pseudepigraphical *Testament of Job* where some poor people ask Job for loans so they can become merchants in big cities. They promise to use their profits to help other poor people. Job agrees with their plan. Often, however, these new merchants would lose property through theft or in some other fashion. They would return to Job and ask for mercy. What would Job do? προέφερον αὐτοῖς τὸ χειρόγραφον (“I brought to them the written document”), and then Job announced that their debt was forgiven.<sup>2</sup> Here too χειρόγραφον seems to refer to a loan document, one that included an implicit or explicit “handwritten signature,” an expression of personal commitment to repay.

This concept of taking personal responsibility, found both in χειρόγραφον and in its corresponding verb χειρογραφέω, is not limited to debt contexts. Papyrus Oxyrhynchus I. 37<sup>ii.4</sup>, dated to AD 49, states, ἐὰν χειρογραφήσῃ . . . ἐκεῖνο τὸ ἐνχειρισθὲν αὐτῇ σωματίον . . . τετελευτηκέναι . . . (if she makes a written declaration that the young child placed into her hands has died). Notice that there is no implication of a promise or obligation to repay a debt. However, the sense of a “personally signed and binding document” is very much in play, in this case a formal declaration regarding the disposition of a child.

Consider the Flinders Petrie Papyrus 104<sup>9</sup>, dated to 244/243 BC. A similar emphasis on the more general concept of taking official personal responsibility is present, though again not with the connotation of promising to repay debt: κε[χει]ρογραφήκασι τὸν εἰθισμένον ὄρκον τοσούτου μεμισθῶσθαι (they have written out the accustomed oath that it has been sold for this price). While not binding a debtor to future obligation, this bill of sale clearly represents a written personal commitment to a fact, an affirmation of the purchase price.

In both debtor and non-debtor contexts, then, χειρόγραφον maintains a sense of taking personal written responsibility in some kind of formal setting. There are examples, however, where the term can employ a slightly more generic sense.

Polybius, a Greek historian of the mid-second century BC, wrote about the Macedonian leader Perseus, who engaged in open war with

<sup>2</sup>The *Testament of Job* 11.11

Rome in 171 BC. Polybius explains that after Perseus' defeat, some of his supporters refused to admit that they had ever been on his side. They did this in spite of the fact that letters had been intercepted revealing their true intentions. In referring to these communications, Polybius says, ἐλεγχόμενοι γὰρ κατὰ πρόσωπον ὑπὸ τῶν ἰδίῳν χειρογράφων . . . (having been openly exposed by their own writings). Here, χειρόγραφον refers not to an obligation to repay a debt, nor to an official declaration of personal responsibility, but to clandestine communication between politicians. Even here, however, one could propose some degree of emphasis on personal responsibility for the written material—it was hand-written, and that made the authors' denials of the truth even more arrogant.<sup>3</sup>

The five examples offered so far recommend a number of observations. χειρόγραφον can be used more generically to refer to something written by hand. Even in such generic usage, however, one properly presumes some sense of inherent personal responsibility—"you wrote this with your own hand!" More generally, the sense of formal personal responsibility is very strong. The term comes close to meaning "a signed document." When the concept of debt is contextual, that signed document can refer to a personal and official obligation to repay.

Where does that leave us with regard to Colossians 2:14?

The King James Version offers a most general, and seemingly safe, understanding: "handwriting." Should this simple concept of "written by hand" appear acceptable, one would then look to the immediate context for additional clues as to the nature of that thing "written by hand." The handwriting, or written document, must be connected to commands (τοῖς δόγμασιν), and it must be against us (καθ' ἡμῶν; ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν). The term "commands" would certainly call to mind the two tablets of Sinaitic stone, as well as the will of God subsequently written on scrolls of the Pentateuch. Might this suggest that the "handwriting" or "written document" is actually the law of God itself? God's holy Law is certainly against us—"Clearly no one is justified before God by the law" (Ga 3:11), and "Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin" (Ga 3:22).

Such thoughts would support the NIV 1984 translation of χειρόγραφον: "the written code." With such an understanding, one

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<sup>3</sup>Richard Lenski, in challenging the contention that τὸ χειρόγραφον in Colossians 2:14 should be read to convey the concept of "debt," notes, "Ewald finds that of thirteen such *cheirographa*, five were debtor's bonds, two concerned deposits made, two were labor contracts, one gave authority to act, three were business agreements. This diversity in meaning shows the range of the word." (*The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, 114.) William Hendriksen, in his *Baker New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, also recommends the translation "handwritten document," referring to the law.

would see Colossians 2:14 as somewhat parallel to Ephesians 2:14-15. In Ephesians, Paul says that Jesus “abolish[ed] in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations—ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ αὐτοῦ τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν καταργήσας.” In Colossians 2:14, then, we would see God cancelling the χειρόγραφον and nailing the “written code” to the cross. Such an action presents the law, which was against us, as a victim in a most important respect. As Paul says in Romans 7, “You died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you might belong to another . . . by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit” (Ro 7:4-6). We continue to recognize, of course, that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Ro 7:12). It remains that to this very day. But in critical respects, in its capacity to condemn and in its power to be a slave master, the law has lost its power.

Such an understanding is clearly scriptural, and the core truths proposed are found repeated elsewhere. However, this would not seem to be the point made in Colossians 2:14.

Rather than focusing on the law itself as being cancelled and nailed to the cross, the verse appears to highlight our own personal obligation to the law—our debt of obedience owed in connection with God’s commands, and the debt of consequences owed in connection with our disobedience. That debt is nailed to the cross. Χειρόγραφον, as it represents a formal agreement in which one commits himself to something and accepts relevant consequences, highlights personal responsibility. It highlights personal guilt. And, in being wiped away and nailed to the cross, it highlights the most personal peace.

What recommends such an understanding? Χειρόγραφον’s strong tendency toward “taking personal responsibility through a handwritten document” is significant. More clearly instructive is a collection of patristic texts which shows how Christians in the first centuries after Christ understood the meaning of the term χειρόγραφον. Granted, we do not presume that the doctrine of church fathers is inevitably accurate simply because it is ancient. Scripture remains the determiner of truth. In this particular case, however, it is not primarily the doctrinal content that is in focus, but rather the church fathers’ manner of employing a particular vocable. In this respect, we view their linguistic testimony as equally significant to that of any secular text from the same period. The fact that their linguistic testimony happens to revolve around Colossians 2:14 is a useful bonus. Finally, the fact that they offer accompanying doctrinal content which so beautifully applies their understanding of χειρόγραφον makes us all the richer.

Irenaeus (AD 130-202) represents well the key patristic contribution. His most prominent work is the five-volume *Against Heresies*. It

was composed in Greek, but the majority remains available only through a Latin translation. In evaluating χειρόγραφον, however, this proves not to be problematic, as the Romans imported the Greek term into their language essentially letter-for-letter: *chirographum* is the Latin equivalent of χειρόγραφον. We can safely presume, then, that when we find *chirographum* in the Latin translation of Irenaeus, χειρόγραφον was the original Greek.<sup>4</sup>

Irenaeus, referring to Colossians 2:14, says, “*delevit chirographum debiti nostri, et affixit illud cruci*” (he destroyed the *cheirographon* of our debt, and he fastened it to the cross). The key words are “*debiti nostri,*” or “of our debt.” Irenaeus is not saying that the Lord destroyed the Sinaitic Code of our debt. That would be quite challenging to understand. He is saying that Christ nailed to the cross the “‘hand-written’ document of our debt,” or employing the nuances gained from the earlier cited uses of χειρόγραφον, “that document that records our personal responsibility for a debt.”

Granted, there wasn’t a specific “single piece of papyrus” debt document actually in existence, but this doesn’t present an interpretative dilemma. We presume a similar metaphorical nuance in the subsequent Colossians phrase “nailed to the cross”—the context of Scripture leaves little doubt that the only writing physically attached to Jesus’ cross was the Pilate-produced trilingual notice. There wasn’t a physical piece of debt-document papyrus, and the papyrus wasn’t physically nailed to the cross, but we understand exactly what the Spirit is saying. It is as if we *had* signed our name to a piece of paper, a paper which obligated us to obey God’s law perfectly. We owe God this. Having disobeyed, we incurred another debt—our signature obligates us to the consequence of eternal punishment. We owe God that too.

This official personal obligation to repay a debt, χειρόγραφον, is modified in Colossians 2:14 by τοῖς δόγμασι. One might translate the dative “with regard to decrees” or “in connection with commands.” Surely our debt and its obligation to repay are linked to God’s commands, as these are the standards to which we are obligated. But note how τοῖς δόγμασι is the term that represents the written code; χειρόγραφον represents our obligations in connection with that code.

Irenaeus sheds light on how χειρόγραφον was understood in the century following the composition of Colossians. This understanding

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<sup>4</sup>One does exercise care in presuming ongoing exact equivalence when one language absorbs a loanword from another. In this case, the risks of divergence are much smaller given the nature of Greek’s preservation during the Roman period. To a large degree the languages operated jointly—it was not uncommon for educated Romans to be bilingual. A divergence between the Latin meaning of *chirographum* and the Greek meaning of χειρόγραφον, then, would be less likely.

was sustained into the time of Ambrose (337-397), who links the concept of Christ cancelling our own debt document (*chirographum*) with the fact that we can improperly refuse forgiveness to those who owe us spiritual debts.<sup>5</sup> Chrysostom (346-407) carried on with an identical grasp of the term.

In the case of Chrysostom, we have the advantage of working with his original Greek. In a homily on Colossians, he states, “Χειρόγραφον γάρ ἐστίν, ὅταν τις ὀφλημάτων ὑπεύθυνος κατέχηται”—For it is (called) a *chirographon* when someone is held as liable for debts.<sup>6</sup>

In the same sermon, Chrysostom grapples with the particular nature of this “personal commitment to pay a debt” document. He asks, Ποῖον χειρόγραφον; Ἡ τοῦτό φησιν, ὃ ἔλεγον πρὸς τὸν Μωϋσέα, ὅτι Πάντα ὅσα εἶπεν ὁ Θεὸς ποιήσομεν, καὶ ἀκουσόμεθα ἢ εἰ μὴ τοῦτο, ὅτι ὀφείλομεν τῷ Θεῷ ὑπακοήν. . . . (What kind of a *chirographon* /debt document is it? Either they say this, that it refers to that which the Israelites said to Moses—“We will do everything God has said, and we will obey”—or if not this, it refers to the fact that we owe obedience to God . . .) Chrysostom clearly sees *χειρόγραφον* not as referring to the law itself, but as referring to that formal personal obligation humans properly commit to, or simply acknowledge, in connection with that law.

Understanding *χειρόγραφον* in such a fashion helps us preach the gospel in a most striking way. The Holy Spirit did have one particular image in mind when he said that the *χειρόγραφον* which was against us was wiped out, was nailed to the cross. He was thinking of a document which had our signature on it, our personal commitment to do all that the Lord has said. We can't escape that obligation. It is a birthright, and it would have been our death. But that obligation to obey, and the additional debt of deserved punishment we have incurred, was taken out of the way. My piece of paper, with my own signature on the bottom, with my eternal condemnation hanging over my head as the darkest of impenetrable clouds . . . humanity's collective piece of paper was pierced by a nail on the cross of Jesus Christ. It was crucified. It was done away with. It was cancelled.

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<sup>5</sup>Sic enim scriptum est, quia donavit *omnia delicta, delens quod adversum nos erat chirographum decreti*. Cur nos aliorum tenemus chirographa, et volumus exigere aliena, qui nostrorum utimur indulgentia? [For thus it is written, that he has forgiven “all transgressions, doing away with the handwriting (obligation to repay a debt) of/connected to the ordinance that was against us.” Why, then, do we hang onto the handwritings (obligations to repay a debt) of others and we want to exact payment of the debts of others, we who are enjoying the remission of our own (obligations to repay a debt)?] Note how the application of the Colossians 2:14 truth employs the same term found in Colossians 2:14 (*chirographum*), and in an explicitly “debt obligation” context. [*Letters of St. Ambrose 41.8*]

<sup>6</sup>*Colossians Homily 6*

In Colossians 2:14, the Spirit makes the cross as personal as it could possibly be. It was my debt, and my debt is no more.

Chrysostom says more regarding χειρόγραφον and Colossians 2:14. For a moment, stand in the *Hagia Sophia* of Constantinople 1600 years ago and be blessed by his preaching.

Christ came once. He found that document detailing our debt (χειρόγραφον), the one inherited from our fathers, the one to which Adam himself had affixed his signature. It was Adam who incurred the first part of that debt; we increased the loan amount with our own sins committed afterward. A curse was there, and sin and death and the condemnation of the law.

Christ abolished all these things, and he displayed a heart of kindness. Now with a shout Paul exclaims, "That debt document (χειρόγραφον) of our sins which stood against us, even this he has taken out of the way by nailing it to the cross." Paul did not say that Christ smeared something over it. He did not say that Christ scribbled over it, but that Christ nailed it to the cross, in order that not a trace of it might remain.

Yes, for this reason he did not smear over it but tore through it. For the nails of the cross tore through and destroyed it so that it might be powerless for eternity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ἦλθεν ἅπαξ ὁ Χριστός εὗρεν ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον πατρῶν ὅπερ ἔγραψεν ὁ Ἄδαμ. Ἐκεῖνος τὴν ἀρχὴν εἰσήνεγκε τοῦ χρέους, ἡμεῖς τὸ δάνειον ἠδξήσαμεν ταῖς μετὰ ταῦτα ἀμαρτίαις. Κατάρτα ἦν ἐκεῖ καὶ ἀμαρτία καὶ θάνατος καὶ νόμου κατάκρισις· πάντα ταῦτα ἀνείλεν ὁ Χριστὸς καὶ συνεχώρησε. Καὶ βοᾷ ὁ Παῦλος λέγων· "Τὸ χειρόγραφον τῶν ἀμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναγνίστον ἡμῖν, καὶ αὐτὸ ἦρκεν ἀπὸ τοῦ μέσου, προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ." Οὐκ εἶπεν ἀπαλείψας αὐτό, οὐκ εἶπεν χαράξας ἀλλὰ προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ, ἵνα μηδὲ ἴχνος αὐτοῦ μείνη. Διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ ἀπήλειψεν ἀλλὰ διέρρηξεν· οἱ γὰρ ἦλοι τοῦ σταυροῦ διέρρηξαν αὐτὸ καὶ διέφθειραν ἵνα ἄχρηστον γένηται τοῦ λοιποῦ. [*Catecheses ad illuminandos (Catechetical sermons for those needing instruction)* 3.21]