

# What ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ are the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου?

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## Dates:

Received: 03 Apr. 2014

Accepted: 12 Apr. 2014

Published: 15 Aug. 2014

## How to cite this article:

Roth, D.T., 2014, 'What ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ are the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου?', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70(1), Art. #2676, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2676>

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The expression τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is one of the most discussed, and most disputed, phrases in Galatians. In the following article, insight into the meaning of this phrase is sought by first of all clarifying and summarising the full scope of issues which must be explained by any interpretation of the phrase. Such a summary overview has often not appeared in various scholarly discussions. Subsequently, the primary proposed interpretations are discussed with the argument ultimately being made that it is Paul's conception of 'the world' which provides the key to a solution to the interpretive conundrum that best satisfies the entire context of Paul's letter and argument.

## Introduction

One of the most discussed, and most disputed, phrases in Galatians is the expression τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. Although there is universal agreement on the rather obvious fact that for Paul the general meaning of στοιχεῖα is negative and that freedom from enslavement to them has occurred through the work of Christ,<sup>1</sup> scholarship on the specific meaning of the term is marked by a complete lack of consensus.<sup>2</sup> For example, whereas Schmithals (1972:45, n. 91) pronounced '[n]owadays it may be acknowledged as proved that in the τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου we have to do with personal angelic powers', Delling (1961:684) declared, 'to speak of spiritual forces [as the referent for the phrase] is a forced solution which conflicts with the linguistic findings and is hardly in accord with the context.' In the light of the ongoing debates, there is much to be said for the comments of Dunn (1993):

The long-running dispute over the precise meaning of the phrase (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*) ... is another example of either-or exegesis ... Does it denote 'the elemental substances' ... or 'the elemental forms' of religion ... or 'the heavenly bodies, the stars' understood as divine powers which influence or determine human destiny ... The answer probably 'All three!' Or more precisely, that Paul did not have such distinction in mind.<sup>3</sup> (pp. 212–213)

At the same time, a distinction that Paul did have in mind may indeed be discernible, especially when the variety of issues that any proposed meaning of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου must adequately address, is considered. Since the full scope of these issues has often not appeared in various scholarly discussions, the following study has the goal of first clarifying and summarising the various elements that must be explained when seeking to understand the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. Only then will proposed interpretations be discussed with the argument ultimately being made that it is Paul's conception of 'the world' which provides the key to a solution to the interpretive conundrum that best satisfies the entire context of Paul's letter and argument.

## The issues that the interpretation of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου must address

While most interpreters and commentators recognise the importance of the following issues as they relate to the proper understanding of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, these issues are

1. In the undisputed Pauline epistles, the term occurs only in Galatians (Gl 4:3, 9) with a further two occurrences found in the disputed epistle to the Colossians (Col 2:8, 20). In both of the verses in Galatians and in Colossians 2:8, the concept of slavery or captivity to the στοιχεῖα is evident. In Colossians 2:20, the Christian is said to have died with Christ to the στοιχεῖα. Though the occurrence of the phrase in Colossians should not be ignored, and the other three New Testament (NT) occurrences (Heb 5:12 & 2 Pt 3:10, 12) should also be kept in mind, this article focuses primarily on the two verses in Galatians with only occasional reference to the other verses in which the term occurs.

2. The lack of consensus did not simply arise in the modern era; rather, it has been present in the biblical interpretation of every era. Illustrative of this fact is the observation of Hincks (1896:183): 'Perhaps no other New Testament expression has divided commentators so evenly. In the ancient church, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Gennadius, perhaps Eusebius appear upon one side; upon the other, Chrysostom, Epiphanius, Theodoret, Theophylact of Bulgaria. Among mediæval and modern scholars, Erasmus, Calvin, Grotius, De Wette, Meyer, Weiss, Lightfoot, Sanday, Schaubach, English-American revision, are opposed to Neander, Schneckenburger, Hilgenfeld, Klöpffer, Weizsäcker, Lipsius, Spitta, Everling, and Ritschl. (It should be added that the last-named group, though united in discarding the ethical signification of the phrase adopted by the former, are not all agreed as to the meaning to be substituted for it.)' Cf. also the comment by Burton (1921:510): 'The meaning of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου has been discussed from the early Christian centuries, and is still in dispute.' It should come as no surprise, therefore, that no consensus has been forthcoming in the century since Hincks and Burton wrote these words.

3. A similar comment can be found in Morris (1996:128).

often discussed in a piecemeal manner as they relate to the strengths and/or weaknesses of a particular proposed interpretation. However, given the fact that there is general agreement with Matera's (1992:150) statement, '[w]hat Paul intends by this puzzling phrase [τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου] can only be determined in light of the entire passage (4:1–11)', this article begins by enumerating the most important issues that a posited meaning of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου must be able to explain.

Firstly, the interpretation of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου must be able to account for the identification of being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (Gl 4:3) as, at least to a certain extent, equivalent to being ὑπὸ νόμον (Gl 4:5).<sup>4</sup> That the phrases are in some sense synonymous is seen not only because of the parallel structure in Galatians (4:3, 5), and the manner in which these verses continue a series of images relating to being under the Law,<sup>5</sup> but also because in 4:9, Paul informs the Galatians that to come under the Jewish law<sup>6</sup> is to return to τὰ στοιχεῖα and to serve them again. As Reicke (1951:259) observed, '[p]articularly the repetition of the word "again" in this verse forces us to affirm a certain identification of Law and the "elements" of the universe.'<sup>7</sup> Paul's line of thinking appears to be that the Galatians were once under τὰ στοιχεῖα, then came out from under them, but now would be returning to an enslavement to τὰ στοιχεῖα by coming under the Jewish law.

Secondly, the fact that the Galatians were formerly under τὰ στοιχεῖα means that the understanding of this term must also be able to account for the relationship between being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and being enslaved to τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὐσιν θεοῖς (Gl 4:8) before coming to know the true God, or rather, coming to be known by this God (Gl 4:9). Both in Galatians and Colossians, Schweizer (1988) rightly noted:

The meaning of the στοιχεῖα hinges exegetically on their relation to the 'beings that by nature are no god' (Gal 4:8), the 'principalities and powers' (Col 2:15), and the 'angels' (Col 2:18). (p. 455)

In other words, the interpretation of τὰ στοιχεῖα must be able to account for not only the religious situation of a Jew under the Law, but also of the religious situation of a pagan involved in the worship of idols.

Thirdly, since the mention of τὰ στοιχεῖα in Galatians 4:9 is immediately followed by the mention of the observance of 'days and months and seasons and years' (Gl 4:10), this

4. This point has recently been forcefully argued by De Boer (2007). Others highlighting that contextually there must be some type of relationship between being under the elements and being under law are Bruce (1982:193); Fung (1988:181); Lührmann (1992:80); Luther (1953:349–353); Martyn (1998:393); Mußner (1988:297–298); Pohl (1995:167).

5. Hansen (1994:116) writes, '[t]his picture of slavery under basic principles of the world continues the series of images representing slavery under the law: "held prisoners by the law" (3:23), "under the supervision of the law" (3:25), subject to guardians and trustees (4:2). So in some sense Paul understood the basic principles of the world as equivalent to the Mosaic law [emphasis original]'. Cf. also Cole (1989:157); Cousar (1982:90); and Dunn (1993:212).

6. That the Galatians were entertaining, and even desiring, to come under the Jewish law is seen in Galatians 4:21.

7. Martyn (1998:393) also emphasises the importance of the idea of 'returning again'.

is yet another relationship that must be elucidated by an explanation of Paul's meaning when using the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα.<sup>8</sup>

Fourthly, it should not be overlooked that Paul writes that τὰ στοιχεῖα are more precisely τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. Thus, Martyn (1998) rightly comments:

An answer [to the puzzle of the στοιχεῖα] may lie in our noting again that Paul does not speak merely of the elements, but specifically in Galatians 4:3 of the elements of the cosmos [emphasis original]. (p. 401)

Or, as Reicke (1951:264) put it, '[w]hatever στοιχεῖον means for Paul then ... the relationship with the world should be considered of primary importance [emphasis original]'.<sup>9</sup> Once again, the interpretation of τὰ στοιχεῖα relates not only to the term itself, but also to a relationship with other concepts – in this case the genitive τοῦ κόσμου.

Fifthly, it is important to note that the introduction of the στοιχεῖα in Galatians 4:3 is immediately followed by the solution to the problem of enslavement to the στοιχεῖα:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Gl 4:4–5, New Revised Standard Version)

Martyn (1998:393) has again helpfully linked this statement to the interpretation of στοιχεῖα by observing that one of the four striking motifs of Galatians 4:3–15 is 'God has terminated that enslavement [to the στοιχεῖα] by sending his Son.'

Finally, while the five issues mentioned above are the primary considerations relevant to any consideration of the proper interpretation of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, two other peripheral points should also be kept in view. These points are that the interpretation should fit into the broader context of the Galatian correspondence as well as not completely ignore other New Testament (NT) uses of the phrase.<sup>10</sup> At this point, the above discussion can be summarised in outline form, thus providing a list of issues that an interpretation of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου must consider:

1. How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and being ὑπὸ νόμον are related.

8. Meyer (1884:167) pointed out that Chrysostom, Theodoret, Ambrose and Pelagius all referred the στοιχεῖα to the Jewish observance of new moons, feasts and Sabbaths. Others noting the importance of relating τὰ στοιχεῖα to Galatians 4:10 include Hansen (1994:128); Lührmann (1992:84–85); Moore-Crispin (1989:211); and Ridderbos (1956:161–162). Cole (1989:164) may be correct in stating, '[i]t is not certain whether the "elemental spirits" of verse 9 (or "elements") are actually identified by Paul with these months and seasons, now being observed in Galatia, or whether such customs are only an example of slavery to these elements by "returning to the infants' class" in the religious world, which seems preferable.' However, as his own quote indicates, identification is not necessary for a relationship between the concepts to exist, and what is required is not a demonstration of the identical nature of the two but some explanation of how the στοιχεῖα and the observance of 'days and months and seasons and years' are related.

9. Also considering the importance of the genitive following τὰ στοιχεῖα is Bandstra (1964:48–49) and Bruce (1982:194).

10. Of course, the use of the term elsewhere in the NT is not determinative for Paul's meaning; however, there may be a sense in which the use of the term could have been conditioned, at least partially, by a shared interpretive background. It is in this broader sense that points of contact may be considered between the Pauline and other NT uses of the word στοιχεῖα.

2. How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and being enslaved to τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς are related.
3. How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is related to observing 'days and months and seasons and years' (Gl 4:10).
4. How τὰ στοιχεῖα are related to ὁ κόσμος.
5. How being enslaved to τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is solved in being 'redeemed' by Christ.
6. How Paul's use of τὰ στοιχεῖα relates to other NT uses of the term.

These primary interpretive issues should be kept clearly in mind as attention is now given to lexical and semantic considerations concerning the word στοιχεῖα.

## The lexical and semantic range of στοιχεῖα in the Ancient World

Although commentators and scholars have generally made reference to the variety of meanings that the term στοιχεῖα had in the ancient world (cf., e.g., Bruce 1982:193–194; DeMaris 1992:444; Duncan 1934:134–135; Hammer 1962:82; Lagrange 1950:99; Lietzmann 1932:25; Lightfoot 1921:167; and Meyer 1884:167),<sup>11</sup> several studies have provided a more exhaustive examination of the occurrences and meaning of the word at the centre of the present discussion. One of the earliest articles to marshal numerous patristic citations bearing on the meaning of στοιχεῖα is that of Hincks (1896:184–186).<sup>12</sup> He was followed in specialised studies by Diels (1899) and Lagercrantz (1911); however, numerous decades later, Blinzler (1963:429) commented that despite numerous studies there was still no clarity concerning the meaning of the word in Paul's era. His helpful contribution to the discussion began by summarising nine meanings of στοιχεῖα that have been considered in scholarly literature (cf. Blinzler 1963:430), ultimately concluding that 'von den in vorpaulinischer Zeit tatsächlich belegten Bedeutungen Buchstaben, Grundlagen, Grundstoffe kommt bei Paulus schon rein sprachgeschichtlich – von exegetischen Erwägungen also ganz abgesehen – nur die letztgenannte in Betracht' (Blinzler 1963:439). A key reason for this conclusion is that according to Blinzler's statistics a full 78.3% of all known occurrences of στοιχεῖα refer to the physical elements, and that when στοιχεῖον and κόσμος appear together every other meaning is excluded.<sup>13</sup> Although the argument of the lexical meaning of στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου being restricted to the physical elements in the time of Paul has been accepted and strengthened by several subsequent scholars,<sup>14</sup> there ultimately is also nearly universal agreement

11. Some of the most extensive discussions in a commentary appears in Oepke (1964:93–96). Detailed discussion in an article not uniquely devoted to the issue can be found in Belleville (1986:64–69).

12. Hincks (1896) cited passages found in Clement of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Theodoret, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Gennadius, Eusebius, Theophylact of Bulgaria, Tertullian, Jerome and Augustine.

13. See his chart and argument in Blinzler (1963:440). Blinzler lists eleven occurrences in ancient Greek literature where these terms appear together.

14. With the aid of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, Rusam (1992) considerably expanded the list of occurrences of στοιχεῖον and κόσμος together in non-Christian authors and concluded that in every new occurrence of στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου that he found (with the exception of a hint in Sextus Empiricus that the Pythagoreans used the term to refer to numbers) the physical elements were in view. Schweizer also wrote several articles arguing for, and exegeting from, this basic perspective (cf. Schweizer 1970, 1988, 1989).

that Paul cannot be referring (merely) to literal fire, water, air, earth (and sometimes ether) when he uses the phrase. This observation leads to the following examination of the major interpretive options in understanding Paul's use of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου.

## Major interpretive options of Paul's use of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου

With the amount of disagreement over the meaning of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and the number of scholars weighing in on the issue, it is not surprising that there are a significant number of variant views on how to understand this phrase.<sup>15</sup> Despite various nuances and differences arising in one aspect or another of the many proposed interpretations, there are nevertheless essentially three main positions concerning the meaning of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου: they are (1) 'physical elements', (2) 'elemental spirits' of some sort, or (3) 'elementary or rudimentary principles' of some sort.<sup>16</sup> Each of these suggestions will now be considered as they relate to the discussion up to this point.

## τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as physical elements

As noted above, the lexical data for understanding τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as the 'physical elements' has led to the interpretation of this phrase in Paul along very similar lines.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of one's view, Martyn (1998:395) certainly is correct in stating that given the lexicographical observations, 'one must have a strong reason to read *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* in some other way'. Thus, the real strength of this interpretation lies in its explanation of the relationship between τὰ στοιχεῖα and τοῦ κόσμου (point 4 *see*: 'How τὰ στοιχεῖα are related to ὁ κόσμος'), in a manner consonant with the vast preponderance of the lexical evidence.<sup>18</sup> In addition, understanding the στοιχεῖα to be physical elements is in accordance with the use of the term in 2 Peter 3:12 (point 6 *see*: 'How Paul's use of τὰ στοιχεῖα relates to other NT uses of the term'; cf. also Bundrick 1991:357; Hincks 1896:187). However, significant difficulties begin to arise once this understanding is applied to the other issues that must be explained by the interpretation of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, such as how being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is related to observing 'days and months and seasons and years' (point 3 *see*: 'How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is related to observing "days and months and seasons and

15. Bandstra (1964:5–30) mentions the views of around seventy scholars just in the 19th and 20th century under three main headings ('The "Principal" Interpretation', 'The "Cosmological" Interpretation', and 'The "Personalized-Cosmological" Interpretation'), with a variety of nuances and emphases under these headings. Cf. also the survey of interpretations in Arnold (1996:55–56, nn. 1–5).

16. There are also the three essential categories in the views of Belleville (1986:64–69) and Bundrick (1991:356–358).

17. Zahn (1907:195–196) wrote 'Schon durch die Verbindung mit τοῦ κόσμου ist gesichert, daß hierunter weder die Buchstaben, noch die *elementa* und *rudimenta* der Religion und Religionskenntnis, noch auch speziell die sogen. Himmelskörper, die Gestirne, oder gar die Engel als Geister, welche die Gestirne beseelen und regieren, zu verstehen sind, sondern die Stoffe und stofflichen Einzeldinge, aus welchem die Welt besteht, die Welt selbst, sofern sie aus solchen besteht.'

18. Rusam (1992:124) goes so far as to state, 'Die Wortverbindung στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου ... schließt aus, daß es sich hier um andere Elemente als um die vier bzw. fünf physikalischen handeln könnte. Der lexikalische Befund läßt keinen anderen Schluß zu.'



years" [Gl 4:10]), to being under the Law (point 1 *see*: How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and being ὑπὸ νόμον are related) or to being enslaved to the beings who are by nature not gods (point 2 *see*: 'How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and being enslaved to τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς are related'), or how being redeemed by Christ solves the problem of being enslaved to τὰ στοιχεῖα (point 5 *see*: 'How being enslaved to τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is solved in being "redeemed" by Christ'). In all of these cases either new aspects to the 'physical elements' are introduced, or the explanation begins to move towards either the 'elemental principles' view or 'elemental spirits' view. For example, in relating the στοιχεῖα to calendar observances Zahn (1907) wrote:

Das mosaische Gesetz bindet die Religion oder doch alle Betätigung derselben im Leben and die Stoffe und stofflichen Dinge, aus welchen die Welt besteht. Nicht nur die Festordnung ist durch den Mondlauf, die Sabbathfeier vom Abend bis zum Abend durch den Stand der Sonne bedingt, die sämtlichen Speiseverbote und Reinigkeitsgebote, die Opfergesetze und sonstigen Kultusvorschriften bezogen sich auf materielle Gegenstände, bestimmte Örtlichkeiten, Zeiten, körperliche Zustände und dergleichen. (p. 197)

Yet, clearly Zahn is no longer discussing earth, air, fire, and water, for to include the movement of the moon and stars, physical objects and locations as well as certain times is to significantly expand the idea beyond the lexical evidence for what is meant simply by the 'physical elements'.<sup>19</sup>

Along similar lines, Belleville (1986:65) has observed that it is difficult 'to see in what sense being "under the physical constituents of the world" (v. 3) and being "under law" (v. 4) are parallel.' Many scholars have felt the burden of this difficulty and have therefore shifted away from a purely physical understanding of the στοιχεῖα despite initially being firmly committed to the 'physical elements' interpretation. Schweizer began to speak of the 'power' of the elements and the belief of the ancient people in the 'cosmos'<sup>20</sup> while Delling (1961) subtly changed directions by writing:

Paul is here using his initial expression – στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου – in a new way. But in so doing it he is obviously building on thoughts common to his age, στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου denotes that whereon the existence of this world rests, that which constitutes man's being. Paul uses it in a transferred sense for that which whereon man's existence rested before Christ even and precisely in pre-Christian religion, that which is weak and impotent, that which enslaves man instead of freeing him. (p. 685)

Although I believe that Delling is correct in his statement, it is important to notice that he is no longer speaking strictly about constituent elements of the *physical* world but is speaking

19. A unique approach also shifting the understanding of the physical elements is that of Martyn (1998:404) who understands the elements of the cosmos as 'pairs of opposites' and then argues that when Paul speaks of them he 'has in mind not earth, air, fire, and water, but rather the elemental pairs of opposites listed in 3:28, emphatically the first pair, Jew and Gentile, and thus the Law and the Not-law.' Although this proposal is intriguing, I do not ultimately find it convincing.

20. Cf. Schweizer (1988:467–468, 1989:117). Even in saying this, however, Schweizer (1970:257) remained firmly committed to the 'physical elements' understanding: 'Dabei bleiben die Elemente rein physische Gegebenheiten, die freilich eine gewisse Macht ausüben.' Exactly how purely physical elements exercise power (apart from importing spiritual principles into the physical elements) remains unexplained. Cf. also Gaston (1982:72–73).

about the constituent elements or principles of the *religious* world.<sup>21</sup> It is only once this shift occurs that the parallel to being under the Law is understood. A slightly different shift from the physical to the religious world occurs in De Boer (2007), who on the one hand has contended that:

[W]ith considerable confidence we can say that, for Paul in the context of his letter to the Galatians: The phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is a technical expression referring in the first instance to the four elements of the physical universe: earth, water, air, fire. (p. 207)

Yet, on the other hand, the broader context of Paul's argument forces him to expand the understanding of this 'technical expression' considerably in subsequently offering the hypothesis that for the Galatians the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου were the four elements of the universe which the Galatians venerated as gods, a veneration that involved calendrical observances (De Boer 2007:218). Here the elements have not become principles of existence but deities worshipped as if existing.

Presenting yet a further wrinkle in this interpretation, when seeking to understand the relationship between being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and being enslaved to τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς, the idea of 'simple personification' of the elements is often introduced (cf. Schlier 1951:134, n. 3). Yet, once again, though Schweizer (1989) adamantly rejected any sense of this personification leading to a view of the στοιχεῖα as actually being demonic beings, he must at the same time admit that it is certainly difficult to determine where the line between the influence of personified elements and actual demonic beings is drawn.<sup>22</sup> Those agreeing with DeMaris's (1992:445) statement 'by ascribing enslaving power to the elements (Gl 4:3, 9), Paul understands them to be active cosmic forces', also argue that there is a significant difficulty in understanding the beings who are not gods or these cosmic forces simply as a personification of physical elements. After all, how is one to understand Christ redeeming his people from the physical elements (personified or not), for does humanity not remain bound to the actual natural forces throughout all of life? (cf. Belleville 1986:65). If Christ, in fact, redeemed his people from the wrongful personification of the physical elements, this once again seems to reflect a religious problem in relation to the elements, rather than a problem of being under the physical elements themselves.

## τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as elemental spirits

A different interpretation understands the στοιχεῖα not as 'physical elements', regardless of whether they are personified or not, but as 'elemental spirits', usually understood as demonic forces (though also sometimes as angels; cf. Dibelius 1909:79–82). The primary argument for this position is stated by Betz (1979:215), '[t]he identification of the beings which "in nature are no gods" with the "elements of the world" (τὰ

21. Blinzler (1963:442) made this same shift in his interpretation. For additional discussion see under the heading 'τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as elementary or rudimentary principles'.

22. He writes, 'Sie [the στοιχεῖα] bezeichneten also die Macht, die die Welt als solche auf die Seele ausübt, wobei gewiß schwer zu bestimmen ist, wo die Grenze zwischen personifizierter Macht eines Einflusses und eigentlichen dämonischen Wesen zu ziehen ist' (Schweizer 1989:116).

στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) speaks in favor of ... the demonological interpretation (point 2 *see*: 'How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and being enslaved to τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς are related').<sup>23</sup> Tarazi (1994:198) argues that the στοιχεῖα refer to the pagan deities of Galatians 4:8 because Paul says that the Galatians would be turning 'again' to the elements which in verse 8 were described as serving pagan deities and Paul speaks of the 'serving' or 'worshipping' of both the elements (v. 9) and the idols (v. 8). Bruce (1982:204) concurs stating, '[t] his [enslaving ability of the elements] suggests that the στοιχεῖα are demonic forces which hold in thrall the minds of men and women who follow their dictates.' Indeed, Hincks (1896) believes that this relationship between the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς solves the first major difficulty with the interpretation of τὰ στοιχεῖα as 'elemental spirits' or 'pagan deities' writing:

We find no passages, I believe, in contemporary writers, suggesting that this secondary and special meaning was current in the first century. It must be admitted that Paul said 'elements', meaning 'elemental spirits'. But he presumably believed that misunderstanding would be prevented by the contextual identification of these elements with the deities whom the heathen worshipped. (pp. 191–192)

It is not at all clear, however, that the lexical difficulties can be explained away in the manner suggested by Hincks.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, a second tremendous difficulty for this view is the issue of how being under 'elemental demonic spirits' is related to being 'under law' (point 1 *see*: 'How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and being ὑπὸ νόμον are related'). As Fung (1988:190) puts it, '[i]f *stoicheia* denotes the elemental spirits, then it has to be explained how submitting to the regulations of the Jewish law is tantamount to being enslaved to these spirits.'<sup>25</sup> In response, several suggestions have been made.<sup>26</sup>

23. Betz (1979:216, n. 32) also argues that the characterisation of the στοιχεῖα as ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ are so-called because these expressions come from the context of demonology (cf. also Arnold 1996:66). This, however, is refuted by Cole (1989:160; 160, n. 1) who argues that these terms do not really help us 'to fix the meaning more precisely; it merely gives Paul's opinion as to their comparative worthlessness ... It does, however, rule out any concept of "demonic forces" (see Betz) in this context. It is their imperfection, not their power, which is stressed here' (cf. also Pohl 1995:180).

24. It is also not particularly convincing to argue, as Arnold (1996:57) does, 'True, we do not have any manuscripts or inscriptions that can be positively dated to the first century or earlier that illustrate this usage [*stoicheia* as *angels* or *demons*]. But this does not force us to abandon the possibility that the word was used in this sense at that time.' Of course, the lack of evidence does not exclude the possibility of a certain meaning; yet, it does mean that any proposed interpretation lacking evidence must remain hypothetical as far as the linguistic evidence is concerned. For problems with squaring such a view the lexical data, cf. also Bundrick (1991:357–361); Fung (1988:190); Pohl (1995:168); Rusam (1992:124–125); Schweizer (1988:468); and Witulski (2000:85–98). In addition Ridderbos (1956:153, n. 5) pointed out that, 'it is very doubtful that the spirits associated with the στοιχεῖα (in the sense of the heavenly bodies) are themselves also called στοιχεῖα.' Belleville (1986:66) summarises this difficulty with the 'elemental spirits' interpretation by writing, 'although this [the 'elemental spirits' view] is the most common interpretation today, it is also the most problematic. The association of angels with astral bodies is a development subsequent to Paul's day. Also, association and identification are not the same thing.'

25. Ridderbos (1956:153, n. 5) stated the issue more poignantly writing, '[h]ow can Paul conceivably characterize, not only the life of the Gentiles, but also his own former life under the law, as a life lived under the aegis of star-spirits?'

26. The explanation by MacGregor (1954–1955:19) that the demonic interpretation best explains 'the most important stream in Paul's thought—the all-pervading influence in his environment of Gnostic astral religious beliefs' is based on an extremely speculative premise implying Gnostic beliefs are the 'most important stream' in Paul's thinking. Similarly, Tarazi (1994:199) simply denying that Paul connects being under the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου to the Law is also not a reasonable solution to the difficulty. Finally, the simplistic identification of the στοιχεῖα with the 'ghosts' or 'spirits' designated by this term in modern Greek and importing this understanding into the Gentile and Jewish contexts of Paul's day, as is apparently the case in Kean (1897), has not been generally accepted.

Firstly, Oepke (1964:102) simply equates the two in writing, '*Polytheismus und Judentum sind als Dienst der Elementengeister wesentlich identisch. Mit unerhörter Kühnheit ... stellt Pls den Rückfall in Gesetzlichkeit als Rückfall in den Polytheismus, ins Heidentum hin!*' However, most have rightly asked with Mußner (1988:294; cf. Pohl 1995:167) if this is really what Paul has done, and have essentially agreed with Pohl's sentiment that such identification is rather unlikely, if not unthinkable.

Therefore, a second suggestion is far more popular, namely, that the connection between the Law and the 'elemental spirits' is found in the mediating angels of Galatians 3:19.<sup>27</sup> However, once again, there are several difficulties with this view. Firstly, Bruce (1982:203) rightly observed that, 'Paul's reference to the angels in 3:19 is too incidental for us to be sure of this [that 3:19 prepared the readers for the mentioning of the στοιχεῖα].' Secondly, even if the στοιχεῖα are to be understood as the angels in Galatians 3:19 it is still not clear that Paul conceives of the mediating function of the angels at Sinai as resulting in being 'under the angels' when he speaks of being 'under the Law' (cf. Lagrange 1950:101). Thirdly, Arnold (1996:62) and Gaston (1982:72) both have disputed Reicke's identification of the στοιχεῖα with the mediating angels of Galatians 3:19, Arnold rather preferred to understand the angels in view as the more general 'angels of the nations' as seen in Sirach 17:17, 1 Enoch 20:5 and Jubilees 15:31. Yet, this merely reintroduces the same problem in a different way for it still must be explained how the cosmic spirits in paganism can be equated with the angels (including the mediating angels) in Judaism.<sup>28</sup>

A third attempt to link the Law with a view of the στοιχεῖα as 'elemental spirits' is through Galatians 4:10 (point 3 *see*: 'How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is related to observing "days and months and seasons and years" [Gal 4:10]'). This argument points out that the specific points of contact between the Galatians' paganism and their contemplating coming under the Law, are the observances of temporal festivals that are governed by the movement of the heavenly bodies (cf. Bruce 1982:204, 1984:204–205; Duncan 1934:136–137; Lietzmann 1932:26; and Schlier 1951:134).<sup>29</sup> Reicke (1951:272) pointed out how Jubilees and 1 Enoch connect these types of calendar observances with what the angels, the watchmen, taught mankind, and De Boer (2007) has gone so far as to state that:

[T]he single point at which the veneration of the τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is functionally and conceptually equivalent to the observance of the Law in Galatians 4.1–11 is the *calendrical observances* mention in 4.10 [emphasis original]. (p. 222)

27. This position was extensively argued by Reicke (1951:261–263) and Schlier (1951:135–137), though it had already been mentioned by Duncan (1934:135). Cf. also Hammer (1962:82).

28. Bundrick (1991:361) dismisses all these attempts writing, '[t]he argument that somehow the mediating angels of Judaism (cf. Gal 3:19) function in a similar way to the cosmic spirits in paganism is not convincing.'

29. Dunn (1993:228) states, '[o]f particular relevance for us here is the evident integration of "Torah piety" and "calendar piety" achieved within such Jewish groups, and the importance of the heavenly bodies in determining the right dates for such Torah observances.'

However, while the observance of festivals determined by the calendar may be a point of contact between paganism and Judaism, limiting the conceptual equivalence to this point seems to present a somewhat truncated view. Admittedly, there is a certain cognitive dissonance involved in Paul's association which presses for resolution.<sup>30</sup> Being 'under law' (Gal 4:4–5), however, was surely not limited to the observance of festivals, and the Galatians' considering coming under the Law prominently included other elements of the Law, most notably circumcision (Gal 5:1–4). As Wright (2013) has noted:

those 'in the Messiah' are children and heirs of God ... and must not turn back to the *stoicheia* – which, however, puzzling a usage it may be, is obviously closely related in Paul's mind to the Galatians' desire to get circumcised. (p. 1147)

Seeing the calendrical observances as the *only* point of contact ignores an additional and far more encompassing, 'worldly' point of contact, a point which is discussed further below.

Before considering a final interpretive understanding of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου it should briefly be mentioned that the 'elemental spirits' interpretation also confronts some difficulties in its understanding of how Christ solved the enslavement to the στοιχεῖα (point 5 see: 'How being enslaved to τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is solved in being "redeemed" by Christ') and how this interpretation relates to the other occurrences of the phrase in the NT (point 6 see: 'How Paul's use of τὰ στοιχεῖα relates to other NT uses of the term'). A potential parallel with the perspective in Colossians 2:20, demonstrating the manner in which the idea of the 'world' is governing the concept of the στοιχεῖα, makes finding the solution to the enslavement to the στοιχεῖα in Colossians 2:15 problematic.<sup>31</sup> Apart from the fact that the στοιχεῖα are never mentioned in the lists of the 'principalities and powers' in the NT,<sup>32</sup> the fact that having died to the τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου means that one should no longer be living ἐν κόσμῳ (Col 2:20) seems to imply that the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου have to do with the manner of living in a certain sphere.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου are that which characterises life in the 'world'. This idea is central to the final major interpretive option for the passages in Galatians, namely that τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου are best understood as some sort of 'elementary principles'.

30. De Boer's own approach to resolving this cognitive dissonance was noted above.

31. Colossians 2:15 reads: 'He disarmed the rulers and authorities [principalities and powers' in the KJV] and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it' (NRSV). That redemption from servitude to the στοιχεῖα was accomplished in this description of what Christ did on the Cross was argued forcefully by MacGregor (1954–1955:23).

32. Bundryck (1991:362) points out, '[t]he almost axiomatic assumption that *stoicheia* is used by Paul as one of a large number of names for "principalities and powers" (e.g. thrones, dominions, rulers of this world, world-rulers of this darkness) ignores the fact that in no such listing in the NT is *stoicheia* included (cf. Rom 8:38–39; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 6:12; Col 1:16; 1 Pet 3:22). This identification is based on the association of *stoicheia* with *kosmokratores* in the *Testament of Solomon*, coming no earlier than the third century.'

33. Arnold's (1996:65) attempt to solve this problem by arguing that '[t]he κόσμος is not solely the sphere of human activity, but is simultaneously the sphere of demonic activity which wields a powerful and compelling influence on human behavior' is problematic. Firstly, simply making this point does not advance the argument as to whether the στοιχεῖα are properly understood as 'demonic spirits'. Secondly, even if the statement is true in and of itself, it does not follow that *everything* in the cosmos is demonic in the narrow sense of personal demon activity. Circumcision, for example is, in a sense, part of κόσμος but it is not positively demonic; rather, it is part of the old creation that no longer matters in light of the new creation (Gal 6:14–15).

## τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as elementary or rudimentary principles

Before considering the strengths of this position, it is important to note that a key problem with the manner in which the interpretation of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as elementary or rudimentary principles has often been presented is that it applies the concept of 'elementary principles' to too narrow a category. For example, Baur (1875:209) focused on the occupation of elementary religion with 'nothing higher than the elements, principles, and substances of the outward physical life.' Meyer (1884:168) called them 'the immature beginnings of religion.' Lightfoot (1921:173) focused on στοιχεῖα as 'elementary systems of training' that both heathenism and Judaism had in common. Bandstra (1964:171) narrowed the meaning to 'the law and the flesh' and Blinzler (1963:442) to 'sin, flesh, and death' (cf. the criticism of these latter two views in Witulski 2000:116–127). It is, however, a more general and considerably broader perspective that is probably the foundation for the best understanding of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. They are simply *all* the constituent 'worldly' principles of existence apart from Christ.

The lexical data concerning the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου noted above supports an understanding of στοιχεῖα as the 'physical elements' that make up the world precisely because the 'world' in those contexts is understood to be the material, physical world. Though this may perhaps have been the initial association for the Galatians of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, the cognitive dissonance created by the inadequacy of this basic meaning within its context in Paul's epistle would demand resolution. Such resolution is found when the term κόσμος appears again in Galatians 6:14, the only other verse in Galatians to employ the term. Here the κόσμος is not merely the physical world, but the whole of religious existence prior to Christ's redemptive work on the cross.<sup>34</sup> In this verse Paul writes that through the Cross of Christ the world has been crucified to Paul and Paul to the world. The Christian is no longer ἐν κόσμῳ (cf. also Col 2:20) but ἐν Χριστῷ.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, with Bandstra (1964):

We may conclude then that when Paul speaks of 'elements of the world', in Gal 4:3 – with the same idea present in v. 9 –, he is referring to those elements that are operative within that whole sphere of human activity which is temporary and passing away,

34. For this reason it is curious that Witulski (2000:127) argues against the interpretation that Paul uses this term to identify and summarise 'die entscheidenden Elemente und Größen des κόσμος als des vor- und außerchristlichen Seins', based 'vor allem angesichts des Kontextes des Gal, der den galatischen Lesern dieses Briefes eine solche Interpretation kaum ermöglicht hätte.' It seems to me that Galatians 6:14 provides precisely the context that allows and indeed presses for such an interpretation.

35. Blinzler (1963:442), in my estimation rightly, noted, '[d]as Rätsel seines [Paul's] Sprachgebrauchs löst sich, wenn man in Betracht zieht, dass bei ihm der Begriff Kosmos aus der Kategorie des Physikalisch-Gegenständlichen in die Kategorie des Ethisch-Zuständlichen transponiert ist. Der Nachsatz in Kol 2,20 ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ zeigt das allein schon zur Genüge: Der Christ lebt nicht mehr ἐν κόσμῳ = in der unerlösten Sphäre (er lebt ja ἐν Χριστῷ!). Sobald dieser Bedeutungswechsel vorgenommen wird, sind die στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου nicht mehr die konstitutiven Bestandteile der physischen Welt, sondern die konstitutiven Bestandteile der "Welt" als des Inbegriffs der vor- und ausserchristlichen Seinsweise.'



beggarly and incompetent in bringing salvation, weak and both open to and defenseless before sin.<sup>36</sup> (p. 55)

In the light of Paul's use of κόσμος in Galatians and the use in Colossians (point 6 *see*: 'How Paul's use of τὰ στοιχεῖα relates to other NT uses of the term'), it is in the manner just discussed that τὰ στοιχεῖα are best understood as related to ὁ κόσμος (point 4 *see*: 'How τὰ στοιχεῖα are related to ὁ κόσμος').<sup>37</sup>

This understanding of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου also best explains how the elements can be related to both being ὑπὸ νόμον and being enslaved to τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς. It is not that being under the Law is the same thing as pagan idolatry; rather, their point of contact, even if also found in calendrical observances (point 3 *see* 'How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is related to observing "days and months and seasons and years" [Gl 4:10]'), is ultimately that both are now 'equally outdated by Christ' (Cole 1989:159; cf. also the discussion in Carr 1981:75). In this sense it appears that the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου are being used to highlight something that Paul attributes to both Judaism and paganism (Cf. also Baur 1875:208; Belleville 1986:69; Lagrange 1950:100; Lightfoot 1921:172–173; and Pohl 1995:169), namely that at the most fundamental level, their constituent elements are *not Christ* (point 1 *see*: 'How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and being ὑπὸ νόμον are related' and point 2 *see*: 'How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and being enslaved to τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς are related'). Again, in light of the cross, Paul writes οὕτε γὰρ περιτομή τί ἐστιν οὕτε ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ καινὴ κτίσις (Gl 6:15). Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matter;<sup>38</sup> that which matters is a new creation. For Paul, the redemptive work of Christ has been to free his people from the στοιχεῖα of the old 'world', as manifested in both Judaism and paganism, and to bring them into the new (point 5 *see*: 'How being enslaved to τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is solved in being "redeemed" by Christ').<sup>39</sup> The στοιχεῖα are not simply related to the physical elements of the world; the world is just as 'physical' after the crucifixion as before. Nor are the στοιχεῖα 'elemental spirits' which must somehow be found in both the Law and pagan idolatry. Rather, they are ritualistic elements like temporal festivals (Gl 4:10, point 3 *see*: 'How being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is related to observing "days

and months and seasons and years" [Gl 4:10]'), but also such as circumcision or uncircumcision (Gl 6:15) that are all part of the era pre-Christ when humanity was under ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους (Gl 4:2) or 'did not know God' (Gl 4:8). From Paul's perspective, after the Christ event, all such things belong to the κόσμος that is not καινὴ κτίσις.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

Having considered the main interpretive options and discussed their strengths and weaknesses, on the one hand it is rather clear why the interpretation of this term has remained so elusive throughout the history of Christendom. On the other hand, it is ultimately Paul's basic understanding of 'the world', as presented in Galatians, as a religious sphere that was crucified in the crucifixion of Christ which points to the understanding of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as the constituent 'worldly' principles of existence apart from Christ as the interpretation which best addresses the major points that need to be explained when seeking to understand Paul's use of this term.

## Acknowledgments

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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40. Witulski's (2000:12) argument, '[w]enn Paulus mit dem Terminus στοιχεῖα (τοῦ κόσμου) die Elemente und Grundlagen der außerchristlichen Welt hätte bezeichnen und zusammenfassen wollen, hätte er ihn sicherlich häufiger verwendet', seems to require Paul to be a much more systematic thinker than he was and does not appear to adequately allow Paul, based on the occasional nature of the few extant epistles, to latch onto a particular term in one instance that he did not elsewhere find relevant or useful.

36. For comments on the relationship between the 'weak elements' and the 'weak law', cf. DeMaris (1992:444) and Mußner (1988:303) and on the issue of the 'temporary nature' of the στοιχεῖα as paralleled in the comments about being under 'guardians and managers' see Moore-Crispin (1989:211). Martyn (1998:404–406) helpfully points to the ultimate meaning not being found in 'the sensible elements' but in 'the elements of religious distinction', though perhaps links this too closely with 'the elemental pairs of opposites listed in 3:28' (cf. footnote 20 above).

37. Others also discussing this view are Borse (1984:142); DeMaris (1992:445); Fung (1988:191); MacGregor (1954–1955:17–18); Reicke (1951:265); and Ridderbos (1956:154). It should also be pointed out that if this interpretation is accepted, the point of contact with the 'elementary principles' of Hebrews 5:12 can easily be made and 2 Peter 3:10, 12 can be understood in the basic physical sense of στοιχεῖα which is in such strong lexical evidence (point 6 *see*: 'How Paul's use of τὰ στοιχεῖα relates to other NT uses of the term').

38. Martyn (1998:402) comments, '[w]hat is gone with the crucifixion of the cosmos is not simply circumcision, but rather both circumcision and uncircumcision, and thus the distinction of Jew from Gentile.'

39. Cf. the comment by Walters (2003:63): 'Paul's association of the Law with slavery and the connection of that slavery to the *stoicheia tou kosmou* makes the decision confronting the Galatians not only a choice between slavery and freedom but also a choice between *this world* and God's *new creation* [emphasis original].'

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