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The Meaning of the Phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in Galatians*

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This article seeks a fresh answer to the difficult question of the meaning of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in Gal 4.3. The answer is sought by paying close attention to (1) the argumentative context of Paul's use of the phrase in the letter (he posits some sort of equivalence between the veneration of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and the observance of the Law; he does so for contextually relevant theological and rhetorical reasons), and (2) the cultural-historical context of the addressees, the Gentile believers in Galatia (τὰ στοιχεῖα are 'the gods' they once venerated; this veneration involved calendrical observances).

I. Introduction

In what is probably the central theological passage of his letter to the Galatians (4.1–7), Paul introduces a perplexing reference to τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου: 'we [believers in Christ, both Jewish and Gentile] were [all once] enslaved under τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου' (4.3).¹ The meaning of this phrase has long been a matter of debate: To what, precisely, does Paul refer when he here mentions τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου? Put otherwise: What are those στοιχεῖα and in what sense are they τοῦ κόσμου?²

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¹ The full expression found in Gal 4.3 (cf. Col 2.8) is abbreviated to τὰ στοιχεῖα in 4.9 (cf. Col 2.20).

² Ernest De Witt Burton wrote in 1921: 'The meaning of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου has been discussed from the early Christian centuries, and is still in dispute' (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921] 510). The dispute has continued to this day. Burton's appendix on the issue remains valuable (*Galatians*, 510–18). For the recent discussion, see especially J. Blinzler, 'Lexikalisches zu dem Terminus τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου bei Paulus', *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus* 1961 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) 2:429–43; D. Delling, 'στοιχεῖον', *TDNT* 7 (1971) 670–87; L. Belleville, "'Under Law': Structural Analysis and the Pauline Concept of Law in Galatians 3.21–4.11", *JSNT* 26 (1986) 53–78; E. Schweizer, 'Slaves of the

In seeking an answer to this question, we must also attend to two others: Why should Paul want to speak to the Galatians about τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου at all?³ And on what basis can he claim – *persuasively* claim – that Jewish believers and not only Gentile believers were once enslaved ‘under’ (ὑπό) them?⁴

II. The Debate about the Referential Meaning

Commentators on the passage routinely cite the four meanings proposed in Walter Bauer’s standard *Lexicon*. I here cite from the second English edition of 1979 (BAGD):

1. elements (of learning), fundamental principles . . .
2. *elemental substances*, the basic *elements* fr. which everything in the natural world is made, and of which it is composed . . . The four elements of the world (earth, air, fire, water) . . . [cf. KJV: ‘the elements of the world’].
3. . . . the *elemental spirits* which the syncretistic religious tendencies of later antiquity associated w. the physical elements . . . [cf. RSV; NRSV: ‘the elemental spirits of the universe’].⁵
4. *heavenly bodies* . . . [as in ‘the twelve *stoicheia* of heaven’,⁶ i.e., the twelve signs of the Zodiac].⁷

Elements and Worshipers of Angels: Gal 4:3, 9; Col 2:8, 18, 20’, *JBL* 107 (1988) 455–68; D. Rusam, ‘Neue Belege zu dem stoicheia tou kosmou (Gal 4,3.9; Kol 2,8.20)’, *ZNW* 83 (1992) 119–25; C. Arnold, ‘Returning to the Domains of the Powers: *Stoicheia* as Evil Spirits in Galatians 4.3’, *NovT* 38 (1996) 55–76; J. L. Martyn, ‘Christ and the Elements of the Cosmos’, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Studies of the New Testament and its World; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997) 125–40.

3 In the preceding and following verses, Paul refers to (all) believers having been ὑπὸ νόμον, ‘under the Law’ (3.23–25; 4.4–5; cf. 3.10–14). It would have been consistent with this argumentative context had Paul in 4.3 written: ‘we were [all once] enslaved ὑπὸ νόμον’.

4 In 4.8–11, Paul clearly indicates that τὰ στοιχεῖα concern pagan (Gentile) rather than Jewish religious beliefs and practices. See previous note and further on this point below.

5 NAB goes a step further: ‘the elemental powers of the world’. Cf. Rev. Lutherbibel 1984: ‘die Mächte der Welt’. H. D. Betz maintains that the στοιχεῖα ‘are not simply material substances, but demonic entities of cosmic proportions and astral powers which were hostile towards man’; they ‘represent demonic forces which constitute and control “this evil aeon” (1:4)’ (*Galatians. A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979] 204–5). Similarly Arnold, ‘Returning’. More nuanced is J. D. G. Dunn: the phrase was Paul’s ‘way of referring to the common understanding of the time that human beings lived their lives under the influence or sway of primal and cosmic forces, however they were conceptualized’ (*The Epistle to the Galatians* [Black’s New Testament Commentaries; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993] 213). He translates: ‘the elemental forces of the world’.

6 POsl. 4, 18 (BAGD, 769).

7 BAGD, 769. The same four meanings, given in the same order, recur in the sixth German edition of 1988 (Bauer-Aland).

One problem has always been to find attestation for the last two in sources earlier than the second or third century CE.⁸

In the third English edition, published in 2000 and prepared by F. W. Danker (Bauer-Danker or BDAG), these four meanings recur but they are evidently grouped according to the principle of ‘extended definitions’ whereby ‘passages’ that ‘share a given meaning structure’ are grouped together under a single heading:⁹

1. **‘Basic components of something, *elements*’.**
 - a. ‘of substances underlying the natural world, the basic *elements* fr. which everything in the world is made and of which it is composed’.
 - b. ‘of basic components of celestial constellations, *heavenly bodies*’.
 - c. ‘of things that constitute the foundation of learning, *fundamental principles*’.
2. **‘Transcendent powers that are in control over events in this world, *elements, elemental spirits*’.**

For Bauer-Danker, words after an Arabic numeral and in bold type are ‘extended definitions’; words in bold italic type indicate ‘formal equivalents’.¹⁰ The formal equivalents given agree with the four meanings in the 1979 edition, but meanings numbers 1, 2, and 4 of the latter have been placed under one heading in Bauer-Danker (‘basic components of something’). These definitions are thus regarded as belonging to the same semantic field, for they share, in Danker’s words, ‘a meaning structure’. The order has also been changed. Of particular interest is the fact that meaning no. 2 in the 1979 edition has been promoted to the first position in Bauer-Danker (1a).

It is somewhat surprising to observe, however, that Bauer-Danker discusses Gal 4.3 only under meanings 1c and 2.¹¹ Bauer-Danker in fact prefers the former (‘fundamental principles’) for Gal 4.3, favorably quoting the translation ‘elementary ideas belonging to this world’,¹² and appealing for support to an article by L. Belleville from 1986.¹³ This interpretation of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου follows in the footsteps of J. B. Lightfoot (‘elementary teaching’)¹⁴ and Burton

⁸ Blinzler, ‘Lexikalisches’, 439.

⁹ BDAG, viii.

¹⁰ BDAG, viii. Words in normal type after a small letter (a, b, c etc.) indicate ‘subsets of a[n extended] meaning or collections of data relating to it’ (ibid.).

¹¹ The same is true of the instances in Gal 4.9 and Col 2.8, 20.

¹² This translation is attributed to NEB, though the main text of NEB has ‘elemental spirits of the universe’. The meaning favored by Danker is to be found in a footnote.

¹³ See n. 2 above.

¹⁴ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians. A Revised Text with Introduction, Notes, and Dissertations* (London: Macmillan, 1887) 167. Lightfoot gives a useful brief survey of Patristic interpretation (166–67).

(‘elementary teaching’)¹⁵ and can be found in the recent commentaries of R. N. Longenecker (‘the principles of the world’), and F. J. Matera (‘the rudimentary principles of religious life apart from Christ’).¹⁶

Bauer-Danker’s preference for this definition goes against the grain of the research carried out by J. Blinzler (in 1963), E. Schweizer (in 1988), and D. Rusam (in 1993)¹⁷ who have shown conclusively that BAGD’s meaning no. 2 (the basic elements from which everything in the natural world is composed, namely, earth, air, fire, water) is really the only one possible.¹⁸ Their researches show that this was by far the most common meaning of the term στοιχεῖα¹⁹ and then especially when complemented by the genitive τοῦ κόσμου.²⁰ The full phrase thus seems to have attained the character of a technical term for the four elements from which the universe was thought to be composed.²¹

The work of Blinzler, Schweizer, and Rusam thus indicates that this meaning must be the starting point for any discussion of the meaning of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in the Galatian (or the Colossian) context.²² I shall not attempt to show once more the correctness of this view. With 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.

¹⁵ Burton, *Galatians*, 517. Cf. Heb 5.12.

¹⁶ R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas: Word, 1990) 165; F. J. Matera, *Galatians* (Sacra Pagina 9; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992) 150.

¹⁷ See n. 2 for bibliographical information.

¹⁸ In connection with meaning 1a, Bauer-Danker discusses only the instances of the term in 2 Pet 3.10, 12. It does not mention the articles of Blinzler and Rusam at all and though it does mention Schweizer’s article in connection with meaning 1a, it fails to acknowledge the fact that Schweizer applied this meaning to the instances in *Galatians* (also Colossians).

¹⁹ Blinzler (‘Lexikalisches’, 431) calculates that more than 75% of the instances he has come across have this meaning. He writes here: ‘Seit Aristoteles, der noch den Äther – als πέμπτον στοιχεῖον – zu dem Elemente zählte, ist dieser Gebrauch von στοιχεῖον mehr und mehr vorherrschend geworden, namentlich durch die Stoiker, die ihn übernahmen und populär machten’. Cf. p. 439: ‘dank der Stoa war im I. Jahrhundert n. Chr. der Terminus in diesem Sinn längst zu einem Gemeinplatz der griechisch sprechenden Durchschnittgebildeten geworden’.

²⁰ The only exception noted by Rusam (‘Neue Belege’, 121, 124) for the full phrase comes from near the end of the second century CE: According to Sextus Empiricus, the Pythagoreans were convinced that numbers were στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (*PyrrHyp* 3.152),

²¹ See, e.g., Philo *Aet.* 107: ‘there are four elements (στοιχεῖα), earth, water, air and fire, of which the world (ὁ κόσμος) is composed (συνέστηκε) . . . [These four are] the elements of the world (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου)’.

²² So rightly J. L. Martyn, *Galatians. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 394–5; J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) 108.

The Galatians would surely have understood it to have this meaning as well. As Martyn observes, 'one must have a strong reason to read *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* in some other way'.²³

The problem, however, is that this referential meaning is not adequate to the argumentative context in which Paul makes use of the phrase. The phrase must indeed be read 'in some other way,' or perhaps better, 'in some additional way'.²⁴ The phrase does refer specifically to the four building blocks of the universe for the ancients, Paul and the Galatians included, but Paul's concern can hardly be to give teaching about the natural world as such. Nor will the Galatians have heard it as containing merely such teaching. Something more is involved and that is where the other proposed referential meanings (especially 'elemental spirits' and 'heavenly bodies') seem inevitably to have come into play as attempts to make sense of Paul's text.

Assuming the correctness of the conclusion reached by Blinzler, Schweizer, and Rusam about the primary referential meaning of the phrase, this article seeks a fresh answer to the question of its meaning in the context of Paul's letter to the Galatians.²⁵ We begin with some pertinent exegetical observations on Gal 4.1–7 and 4.8–11.

III. Exegetical Observations

A. *Galatians 4.1–7*

'I say that as long as the heir (κληρονόμος) is a child (νήπιος),²⁶ he differs in nothing from a slave, even if he is [in principle] master of the whole estate (κύριος πάντων). ²However (ἀλλά), he is under guardians (ἐπίτροποι) and household managers (οἰκονόμοι) until the date set by his father.

³So also we [believers in Christ]: When we were children (νήπιοι), we were [all] enslaved (ἤμεθα δεδουλωμένοι) under τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου.

⁴And when the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son . . . ⁵in order to redeem those under the Law (ὑπὸ νόμον), in order that we [who have come to believe in Christ] might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ . . . You (pl.) are sons ⁷ . . . you (s.) are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, also an heir (κληρονόμος) through God'.

The fundamental theme of the passage is the believer as 'heir' (4.1, 7), a theme picked up from the last verse of the previous passage: those who belong to Christ

²³ Martyn, *Galatians*, 395.

²⁴ Cf. Blinzler, 'Lexikalisches', 441.

²⁵ When I refer here to 'the context' I mean both the argumentative context of the letter itself and the historical, cultural context of the Galatians to whom Paul addresses this letter. Both contexts must be taken into account since the document is Paul's epistolary communication to a specific group of people in a particular place and time, namely, 'the churches of Galatia' (1.2) sometime in the middle of the first century CE. Cf. Martyn, 'Elements', 125 n. 1.

²⁶ A νήπιος is 'a very young child' (cf. 1 Cor 3.1; 13.11) and thus also a 'minor' (BDAG, 671).

are heirs (κληρονόμοι) according to a promise (3.29), not then on the basis of observing the Law (3.18). The metaphor of the believer as an ‘heir’ is closely related to that of the believer as a ‘son of God’, a theme also picked up from the previous passage (3.26: ‘you are all sons of God’). In ancient society, a son was, or could be, the heir of his father (4.7). Believers in Christ, who are, metaphorically speaking, God’s ‘sons’ by adoption, are by analogy also ‘heirs’ of God (4.7; cf. 3.29), together with Christ, God’s Son (4.4), whom they have put on (3.27) and to whom they belong (3.29).²⁷ Believers share in the messianic sonship of Christ and thus also in his inheritance, the Spirit (3.1–5, 14; 4.6).

1. *Existence ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου was a form of slavery, just like existence ὑπὸ νόμον.* The first thing the reader of this passage learns about τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is that believers (‘we’) were once ‘under’ (ὑπὸ) them and that this situation amounted to enslavement. In this respect, the στοιχεῖα are analogous to guardians (ἐπίτροποι) and household managers (οἰκονόμοι) who have charge of a child in its minority. To be ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου before ‘we’ became ‘[the adopted] sons [of God]’ is thus like being ‘under’ (ὑπὸ) guardians and household managers when a child, in this case the son and heir, is still a νήπιος, a minor. The *tertium comparationis* between the analogy (left column below) and the reality (right column below) evidently lies in the notion of slavery (first three lines below) and its temporary nature (last three lines):

Picture (analogy)	Reality
νήπιος	νήπιοι
ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους	ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου
no better than a δοῦλος	enslaved (δεδουλωμένοι) / a δοῦλος
until the date set by his father	when the fullness of time came
master of the whole estate	adoption as sons
(υἱός and thus) κληρονόμος	(adopted) υἱός and thus κληρονόμος

Making the comparison difficult to assess is the use of personal pronouns, since Paul switches in the reality part from first person plural (‘So also we’; ‘we were enslaved’) to third person plural (‘those under the Law’) and then to the second person, both plural (‘you are sons’) and singular (‘you are no longer a slave’ but ‘a son’, 4.7).²⁸ Paul’s use of the first person plural in v. 3 makes it unlikely that he here wants to make a sharp distinction between the situation of Jews

²⁷ Gal 3.28 shows that the metaphorical meaning of ‘son(s)’ as heir(s) applies to female as well as male believers. Of course, the term ‘heir(s)’ is also being used figuratively, as a metaphor for the reception of the promised Spirit (3.1–5, 14, 15–18).

²⁸ See the similar problem in the immediately preceding passage: ‘we’ in 3.23–25, ‘you’ in 3.26–29, with third person in 3.22. Cf. 3.10–14.

(‘those [who were] under the Law’) and that of Gentiles (‘you are sons’ since ‘you’ Galatian Gentiles are no longer enslaved under τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου). On the contrary, the use of the first person plural in v. 3 indicates that he wants to blur that distinction: ‘so also *we* . . . *we* [all] were enslaved under τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου’. Paul could here have written: ‘So also *you* Gentile Galatians . . . *you* were enslaved under τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου’. But he does not do so. The two parallel ἵνα-clauses that conclude v. 5 along with the causal clause that begins v. 6a also point to a blurring of the distinction between Jew and Gentile (cf. 3.28):

... in order (ἵνα) to redeem *those* under the Law,
in order (ἵνα) that *we* might receive adoption as sons.²⁹
Because *you* are sons . . .

Even aside from the problem of the pronouns, however, the comparison limps a bit (cf. Rom 7.1–5). The picture portrays the movement of a child, a son, from the age of minority to the age of majority, whereas the reality concerns a movement from a situation of enslavement to that of adopted sonship. In the reality part, the position of the children is, for Paul, actual enslavement under τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. In the picture part, however, the position of the child is *like* that of a slave though he is not actually a slave at all; on the contrary, he is legally speaking the master of the whole estate even if he is presently under ἐπίτροποι and οἰκονόμοι.

The picture part evidently presupposes that the father is deceased, a surmise supported by the fact that the term ἐπίτροπος could be used to designate the ‘guardian’ of a boy whose father had died.³⁰ It is difficult to think, however, that a single child, even the heir, would be placed under several ἐπίτροποι. The use of the plural can be explained as an anticipation of the plural τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, which is a relatively fixed expression. But then why the addition of οἰκονόμοι, household managers? The combination of the two terms appears to be without linguistic parallel.³¹ According to Betz, an οἰκονόμος could also supervise the slaves of the household.³² If so, Paul has added the reference to ‘household managers’ to underscore the slave-like plight of the fatherless son during the period of his minority: ‘he is no different from a slave [whom household managers can order about]’. In the reality part, Paul’s use of ‘we’ indicates that he looks at the world from the position of the (formerly) enslaved persons. In the picture part,

29 Cf. 3.14 for similar conjunction of ἵνα-clauses.

30 Cf. 1 Macc 11.1; 13.2; 14.2, where Lysias is the ἐπίτροπος of King Antiochus V Eupator, a minor; Philo *Somn.* 1.107, with respect to orphans; see already Plato *Laws* II.927C–928A (cited by Belleville, ‘Structural Analysis’, 61).

31 See Martyn, *Galatians*, 387.

32 Betz, *Galatians*, 204.

the situation of the child is described from the viewpoint of an outside observer (Paul) who understands that the position of the child is tantamount to that of a slave even if he is, at least legally speaking, the master of the whole estate.³³ The point is the tremendous contrast between the situation of his minority and the situation of his majority when he takes control of what is already rightfully his; that contrast also serves the reality part where the point is the sharp contrast between the situation of enslavement and that of divine sonship even if the latter is not a legal right but a gift.

The image of a child ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους in the analogy recalls the metaphor of the Law as a παιδαγωγός back in 3.23–25. Paul here also uses prepositional phrases with ὑπό (and the accusative): to have been ὑπὸ νόμον (3.23) was to have been ὑπὸ παιδαγωγόν (3.25). A παιδαγωγός was ‘a slave employed in Greek and Roman families to have general charge of a boy in the years from about six to sixteen, watching over his outward behaviour and attending him whenever he went from home, as e.g. to school’.³⁴ The ἐπίτροποι and οἰκονόμοι of 4.2, whatever their precise functions may have been relative to the son and heir, also are represented by Paul as having had charge of a minor, just like the παιδαγωγός. Furthermore, in 3.23–25, Paul adds the image of the παιδαγωγός to his argument primarily to underscore the temporary nature of the Law’s control over humanity, another point of contact with the analogy in 4.1–2. The time of the Law was not eternal: ‘Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a παιδαγωγός’ (3.25). The time of faith has arrived, ending the time of the Law; having been baptized into Christ, believers are now ‘all sons of God’ (3.26). In 4.4–5, the point is similar: ‘When the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son . . . being born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law, that we might receive adoption as sons’; believers in Christ are now ‘sons’ of God (4.6). In addition, if Paul implicitly personifies the Law by comparing it to a παιδαγωγός,³⁵ so he also implicitly personifies τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου by comparing them to ἐπιτρόποι καὶ οἰκονόμοι.

The similarities between 3.23–29 and 4.1–7 make it highly unlikely that the metaphor of the Law as a παιδαγωγός is to be interpreted in a positive way. Custody under the Law as a παιδαγωγός cannot, for Paul in his letter to the

33 For the possible legal background, see Betz, *Galatians*, 202–4. In Paul’s analogy, the age of inheritance has evidently been set by the now deceased father in his will.

34 Burton, *Galatians*, 200; cf. BDAG, 748; Plutarch *Mor.* 4ab; 439–40; Josephus *Life* 76; Epictetus *Diss.* II.22.26; III.19.5–6. The παιδαγωγός was a ‘supervisory guardian’ (cf. 1 Cor 4.15) who had ‘custodial and disciplinary functions’ (cf. NRSV, NAB: ‘disciplinarian’, NIV: ‘supervision’; NJB: ‘a slave looking after us’) ‘rather than educative or instructional ones’ (Longenecker, *Galatians*, 146).

35 See the quotation from Josephus in n. 39 below.

Galatians, have been protective³⁶ or pedagogical,³⁷ but restrictive and oppressive.³⁸ The Law was a jailer, as 3.23 indicates, depriving human beings of their freedom (cf. 2.4; 5.1) and keeping them from righteousness and life (3.21–22).³⁹ From its enslaving curse Christ ‘redeemed’ (ἐξηγόρασεν) believers (3.13). This interpretation of the human situation under the Law as a form of confinement or enslave-

- 36 Supporters of this line of interpretation regard Paul’s claim in v. 23 that ‘we were confined under the Law’ (ὕπὸ νόμον ἐφρουρούμεθα) in a positive light, to signify a protective form of custody. See, e.g., J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians* (Calvin’s Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 66; D. J. Lull, ‘The Law was our Pedagogue: A Study in Gal 3:19–25’, *JBL* 105 (1986) 481–98; S. K. Williams, *Galatians* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 103; Matera, *Galatians*, 136; Dunn, *Galatians*, 197, who appeals to this connotation of the verb in 2 Cor 11.32; Phil 4.7; 1 Pet 1.3. The period of the Law was thus for humanity’s own good, to protect it from transgressions (3.19) or from Sin (3.22). The import of the phrase ‘we were confined under the Law’ in v. 23 is, however, indicated contextually by the qualifying participle ‘being shut up,’ i.e., ‘imprisoned’ (συγκλειόμενοι). The same verb is used in the prior verse in connection with ‘the Scripture’ having ‘shut all things up (συνέκλεισεν) under Sin’. The custody under the Law as a παιδαγωγός cannot, then, have been protective or positive.
- 37 This line of interpretation, which can be combined with the interpretation discussed in the previous note, is based on the image of the schoolmaster who both teaches and chastises. Cf. M. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535, Chapters 1–4* (Luther’s Works 26; St. Louis, MI: Concordia, 1963) 345–6. It appears to lead inevitably to speculation about what the Law functioning as a disciplinary pedagogue is supposed to have taught his charges during the period of their minority (cf. Luther, *Galatians*, 335–51; Calvin, *Galatians*, 66–7). However, as indicated in n. 34 above, a παιδαγωγός was clearly distinguished from a διδάσκαλος or teacher (Plato *Lysis* 208C; *Laus* VII.808D–E; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 146–7). Furthermore in this line of interpretation, the role of the παιδαγωγός is looked at from a father’s point of view in putting his child under the care of a παιδαγωγός. By analogy, God is the parent who has put humanity under the protective care, instruction, and discipline of the Law. As in 1 Cor 4.15 (the only other NT instance of the term), however, Paul looks at the role of the παιδαγωγός from the point of view and experience of the children involved (‘we were under a παιδαγωγός’). His assumption is that believers now look back at the period of their minority as a time when they were unhappily confined ‘under’ a παιδαγωγός (v. 25). That period was tantamount to being ‘under a curse’ – that of the Law (3.10) – and ‘under Sin’ (3.22), which can hardly be construed in a positive sense.
- 38 Burton, *Galatians*, 199; Martyn, *Galatians*, 362–3; F. Vouga, *An die Galater* (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 10; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998) 23; B. Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) 268; D. Sänger, ‘“Das Gesetz ist unser παιδαγωγός geworden bis zu Christus” (Gal 3,24)’, *Das Gesetz im frühen Judentum und im Neuen Testament. Festschrift für Christoph Burchard zum 75. Geburtstag* (ed. D. Sänger and M. Konrad; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Fribourg: Fribourg Academic, 2006) 236–60, esp. 254–60.
- 39 According to Josephus, ‘[Moses] our leader made the Law the standard and rule, that we might live under it as under (ὕπὸ) a father and master (δεσπότης), and be guilty of no sin through wilfulness or ignorance’ (*Apion* II.174, LCL). Here the notion of being ‘under (ὕπὸ) the Law’ implies accountability, not enslavement and oppression as it does for Paul. Cf. J. Marcus, ‘“Under the Law”: The Background of a Pauline Expression’, *CBQ* 63 (2001) 72–83.

ment under the regime of an oppressive παιδαγωγός is consistent with the thrust of 4.1–2, where the guardians and household managers are clearly experienced by the child in the same way.

The conclusion to which the previous observations lead is therefore: Existence ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου was a form of slavery, *just like existence ὑπὸ νόμον*.

2. Existence ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου was tantamount to existence ὑπὸ νόμον. A second thing we learn about τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is that to have been ‘under’ (ὑπό,) them was evidently tantamount to having been ‘under’ (ὑπό) the Law. The conceptual similarity between being ‘under guardians and household managers’ and being ‘under a παιδαγωγός’ (in 3.23–25) already points in the direction of this *equation* of the two situations: Both images have to do with the situation of a child – the heir (cf. 3.29) – in its minority. Since the metaphor of the παιδαγωγός functions as a metaphor for the Law in 3.23–25, the suspicion lies to hand that the image of guardians and household managers also do, at least implicitly. That suspicion finds support in 4.4–5 where Paul uses the phrase ὑπὸ νόμον as an apparent synonym for the phrase ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου: ‘We were enslaved ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου . . . God sent his Son . . . to redeem those ὑπὸ νόμον . . . so you [Galatian believer] are *no longer* (οὐκέτι) a slave [ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου] but a son’. The phrasing here echoes 3.26: ‘Now that faith has come we are *no longer* (οὐκέτι) ὑπὸ παιδαγωγόν [= ὑπὸ νόμον]’.

It is precisely the equation of being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου with being ὑπὸ νόμον that makes Paul’s introduction of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου into his argument peculiar and perplexing.⁴⁰ Why then has Paul introduced the reference to the τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and in what sense can it function as an equivalent, or as a virtual equivalent, for the Law? *That is the crucial exegetical issue presented by the introduction of the reference to the τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου.* The answer to this question may perhaps be found in the second passage.

B. Galatians 4.8–11

⁸But, then, when you did not know God, you were slaves (ἐδουλεύσατε) of beings not gods by nature. ⁹But now having come to know God, or rather having become known by God, how can you turn again (πάλιν) to the weak and impotent⁴¹ στοιχεῖα of which you want to be slaves (δουλεύειν)⁴² once

⁴⁰ As indicated in n. 3 above, it would have been consistent with his argument in the foregoing and the subsequent verses had Paul written the following: ‘as long as the heir is a child . . . he is under a guardian (s.) and a household manager (s.) . . . So also we: when we were children, we were enslaved *under the Law* . . .’

⁴¹ For this translation of πτωχά, see Martyn, *Galatians*, 411. Cf. BDAG, 896.

⁴² ⚡ B: δουλεύσαι.

more (πάλιν ἄνωθεν)? ¹⁰You (want to) observe⁴³ days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹I fear that I may have labored for you in vain!

Paul here calls the attention of his Galatian readers to their past with which he was certainly familiar, having founded the Galatian churches himself (4.13). He had been on site and had first encountered them *before* they had come to believe in Christ. They had once been worshippers of ‘gods’. These ‘gods’ (θεοί) are not specified; they are simply distinguished from the singular, one ‘God’ (θεός). In Paul’s view, and presumably also in the view of the Galatian believers themselves, the ‘beings’ the Galatians had once venerated were actually ‘not gods by nature’. Paul would scarcely have made this point had the Galatians not previously believed the opposite, that they were gods ‘by nature’.

1. The στοιχεῖα are the ‘beings not gods by nature’ once venerated by the Galatians. Paul links the putative former gods of the Galatians to the στοιχεῖα he has introduced into his argument back in 4.3. The link is provided by the verb δουλεύω, which means ‘to be a slave’ or ‘to serve or venerate (as a slave)’:⁴⁴

4.8: you were slaves (δουλεύω) of beings not gods by nature

4.9: you want to be slaves (δουλεύω) *once more* (πάλιν ἄνωθεν) of τὰ στοιχεῖα

In 4.9, Paul equates the στοιχεῖα with the ‘beings not gods by nature’ in 4.8: both are served by human beings who are for that reason like slaves (δουλεύω). He makes this equation without further explanation or justification to his Galatian audience. As Martyn writes: ‘Paul is able to assume some retrospective comprehension on their part when he links these elements with gods they worshiped before his arrival’.⁴⁵ The equation thus appears to be a shared assumption.

The argument in these verses constitutes part of Paul’s attempt to make observance of the Law a very unattractive option for the Galatians, for the basic problem addressed by the letter is that the Galatians are being encouraged to become

43 The verb παρατηρεῖσθε (present tense) could mean ‘are [now fully] observing’, but the context speaks against this: Paul is doing all he can to prevent the Galatians from taking this contemplated step. The verb is probably to be construed conatively (‘you are wanting / intending / beginning to observe’), consistent with the phrase δουλεύειν θέλετε (cf. 1.7, 10; 6.12) and the conative use of the verb ἐπιστρέφετε in the previous verse. Cf. the verb δικαιώσθε in 5.4 (‘you want / intend to be justified in the Law’; BDF, #319). See H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1956) #1878: the conative present ‘may express an action begun, attempted, or intended’. The early reading of P46 (the present participle παρατήρουντες) supports this interpretation for it makes v. 10 part of the question of v. 9, thereby eliminating the seeming contradiction between the two verses (see Betz, *Galatians*, 217 n. 39).

44 Cf. BDAG, 259.

45 Martyn, *Galatians*, 397.

observers of the Law by new preachers who have come into the Galatian setting (cf. 2.6–9; 3.1–5; 5.2–5; 6.12–13). In 4.1–7, Paul has established that existence ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (the situation of the Gentile Galatians prior to Paul's arrival) was tantamount to existence ὑπὸ νόμον (the situation from which Christ redeems human beings). The reverse would then also apply: 'wanting (θέλοντες) to be ὑπὸ νόμον', which according to 4.21a is the desire of the Galatians, is tantamount in Paul's eyes to 'wanting (θέλετε) to be slaves of τὰ στοιχεῖα' (4.9), and thus of the gods they had left behind.⁴⁶ Surely, Paul implies, the Galatians do not want to be in *that* position 'once more' (πάλιν ἄνωθεν)!⁴⁷

2. *The στοιχεῖα are weak and impotent, just like the Law.* The characterization of the στοιχεῖα as weak and impotent is part of the same rhetorical strategy, serving the same general purpose: to dissuade the Galatians from becoming (or perhaps remaining) observers of the Law. Despite appearances to the contrary, the στοιχεῖα are ineffectual for salvation, just like the Law which was unable to give life (3.21).⁴⁸ It will not do to venerate them. These remarks already presuppose a third exegetical observation:

3. *To turn to the observance of the Law is to return to the veneration of the στοιχεῖα.* Paul here implicitly claims that for the Galatians to turn to the observance of the Law is to *return* (ἐπιστρέφετε πάλιν)⁴⁹ to the veneration of the στοιχεῖα and thus to the gods they had previously worshiped. This means that in Paul's mind the observance of the Law and the veneration of the στοιχεῖα were in some sense functionally and thus also conceptually equivalent.⁵⁰ Paul has prepared the way for this equation in 4.1–7, as we have seen: being under the one was tantamount to being under the other. This is clearly Paul's own view of the matter,

46 In the context of Paul's argument beginning at 4.1 (cf. already 3.28), terms for slavery (δοῦλος, δουλός, δουλεύω) have a thoroughly negative connotation (contrast 1.10: Paul as a slave of Christ). Paul here works from the assumption that slavery is a completely undesirable situation, also when it involves 'being a slave' of so-called 'gods' (contrast 1 Thess 1.9: the Thessalonians turned from idols to become slaves [δουλεύειν] of the living and true God, which is a good thing). On the generally negative implications of the verb δουλεύω (and its cognates) for Gentiles, including in religious contexts, see K. H. Rengstorf, 'δοῦλος κτλ.', *TDNT* 2 (1964) 264–65.

47 Cf. 5.1: 'Do not be loaded down *again* (πάλιν) with a yoke of slavery'.

48 Martyn, *Galatians*, 412.

49 Cf. Martyn, *Galatians*, 401. If the verb ἐπιστρέφω means 'to turn around' and thus by extension 'to convert' (cf. BDAG, 382), the combination ἐπιστρέφετε πάλιν evidently means 'to reconvert'.

50 The context indicates that Paul does not so much equate ὁ νόμος and τὰ στοιχεῖα as he does the *observance* (ποιέω) of the Law (3.10, 12; 5.3) and the *veneration* (δουλεύω) of τὰ στοιχεῖα (4.8–9). See below on 4.10.

one he seeks now to impress on the Galatians: He wants the Galatians to see that to turn to the observance of the Law is effectively to go back to their previous situation, before Christ and apart from Christ. It is this rhetorical agenda that has caused Paul to introduce the references to the στοιχεῖα into his argument.⁵¹

If we take the previous three points together, we can say that τὰ στοιχεῖα are the gods the believers in Galatia once worshipped and that the worship of them bears some similarity to the observance of the Law. Unless there was some similarity, either conceptually or functionally (or both), Paul could not very persuasively have made the move of equating the situation under τὰ στοιχεῖα *from* which the Galatians came with the situation under the Law *to* which they are now turning. That brings us to the fourth observation.

4. Like the observance of the Law, the veneration of τὰ στοιχεῖα involves calendrical observances. The Galatians are ostensibly wanting to turn to the Law at the behest of the new preachers present in the Galatian churches. One expects Paul therefore to say to the Galatians in 4.10: You are observing sabbaths and new moons, and such festivals as the Day of Atonement, Passover, and first-fruits.⁵² We may compare Col 2.16 which refers to ‘a festival or a new moon or a sabbath’ in connection with a polemic against τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. Since Paul does not use words such as these, a possible explanation is that Paul is charging the Galatians with actually wanting to return to the calendrical observances associated with τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, thus to their religious way of life prior to their coming to faith in Christ.⁵³ Another possible explanation, however, is to argue that though Paul’s list of calendrical observances is not ostensibly Jewish the terms can cover Jewish holy days: Paul has in view days (ἡμέρας) like the sabbath and the Day of Atonement, months (μηνάς) like the ‘new moon’ (e.g., Num 10.10), seasons (καιρούς) like Passover and Pentecost, and years (ἐνιαυτούς) like the sabbatical years (Lev 25.5) or the New Year festival.⁵⁴ Since the Galatians are turning

51 Martyn (*Galatians*, 397–400) hypothesizes that Paul has introduced the references to τὰ στοιχεῖα into his argument because they formed an important part of the message of the new preachers in Galatia, whom Martyn labels ‘the Teachers’. According to Martyn, the Teachers have been telling the Galatians that ‘Paul did nothing really to terminate’ their ‘ill-informed relation to the elements’ (399); the Teachers thus see it as their task to wean the Galatians from this problematic relation to τὰ στοιχεῖα, doing so by appealing to the foundational example of Abraham (400). In my view, the wording of Gal 4.8–11 does not easily support this hypothesis: Paul seems to assume here that the Galatians had fully given up venerating τὰ στοιχεῖα at the moment they had come to believe in Christ (cf. 1.6–9; 5.7a).

52 Martyn, *Galatians*, 416.

53 So T. W. Martin, ‘Pagan and Judeo-Christian Time-Keeping Schemes in Gal 4.10 and Col 2.16’, *NTS* 42 (1996) 105–19 (112). Th. Witulski sees allusions to the emperor cult in Paul’s language: *Die Adressaten des Galaterbriefes. Untersuchungen zur Gemeinde von Antiochia ad Pisidiam* (FRLANT 193; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000) 152–68, esp. 158–62.

54 Burton, *Galatians*, 233–4 (with the biblical references); also Dunn, *Galatians*, 227–8.

to the Law, so the argument runs, the terms must refer specifically to such Jewish calendrically based observances.

A better explanation for 4.10 is probably that Paul has here chosen words that could cover both Jewish and pagan calendrical observances.⁵⁵ The Galatians are wanting to turn to the Law and the calendrical observances the Law prescribes. For Paul this turning to the Law is tantamount to returning to τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and the calendrical observances associated with them. With his choice of words, which is neither specifically pagan nor specifically Jewish, but could be either or both,⁵⁶ Paul implies that the Jewish observances which the Galatians are now wanting to observe are no different in kind from the observances linked to τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. Paul intentionally uses terms that cover both Jewish and pagan calendrical observances for he wants the Galatians to realize that by turning to the Law they are going back to where they came from. The observance of the Law is not a step forward, but a step backward!

IV. Interim Summary

The overview of the debate about the referential meaning of the expression τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in Section II and the exegetical observations in Section III have led to seven important points about Paul's references to τὰ στοιχεῖα (τοῦ κόσμου) in Gal 4.3 and 9:

- #1. 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.
- #2. Existence ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου was a form of slavery, just like existence ὑπὸ νόμον.
- #3. Existence ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου was tantamount to existence ὑπὸ νόμον.
- #4. Τὰ στοιχεῖα are the 'beings not gods by nature' once venerated by the Galatians.

55 Cf. J. M. G. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1988) 63–4; Betz, *Galatians*, 218. Martyn (*Galatians*, 416–17) may be right in supposing that Paul's language is largely indebted to Gen 1.14 (LXX): 'Let there be luminaries in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them mark the fixed times of seasons (καιρούς), days (ἡμέρας), and years (ἐνιαυτούς) . . . ' (as cited by Martyn). Martyn notes that the list of times found in Gen 1.14 'was sometimes supplemented by the addition of "months", and that the times were sometimes put in order of length' (417, referring here to Philo *de Op. Mundi* 55, 60, and to the work of D. Lührmann, 'Tage, Monate, Jahreszeiten, Jahre (Gal 4,10)', *Werden und Wirken des Alten Testaments* [ed. R. Albertz et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980] 428–45). Cf. *Jub.* 2.8–10; *1 En.* 82.7–9. For the theological implications, see Martyn, *Galatians*, 417–18.

56 Cf. Martin, 'Time-Keeping Schemes', 112.

- #5. Τὰ στοιχεῖα are weak and impotent, just like the Law.
- #6. To turn to the observance of the Law is to return to the veneration of τὰ στοιχεῖα.
- #7. Like the observance of the Law, the veneration of τὰ στοιχεῖα involves calendrical observances.

The first three points are based on Gal 4.1–7, the last four on Gal 4.8–11. Points #2 and #3, and #5 and #6 probably express Paul's own views; it seems unlikely that they represent the views of the Galatians prior to a first reading of the letter. I shall return to them in Section VI below. Points #1, #4 and #7, however, are a different matter. While it is difficult to disentangle the meaning the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου would have had for the Galatians in their own historical, cultural context from the argumentative or rhetorical context in which Paul refers to them in his letter, these three points arguably give an accurate picture of the views of the Galatians before receiving Paul's letter and, by extension, of their views before they became believers in Christ.

V. Τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου for the Galatians Prior to Believing in Christ

Points #1, #4, and #7 of the Interim Summary above provide a window onto the views of the Galatians. We may summarize them as follows for the present purposes:

- #1. Τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου are the four elements of the physical universe: earth, water, air, fire.
- #4. Τὰ στοιχεῖα are the gods the Galatians once venerated.
- #7. The veneration of τὰ στοιχεῖα involves calendrical observances.

These three points allow us to venture a hypothesis about what these στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου meant for the Galatians prior to their becoming believers in Christ: The Galatians venerated the four elements of the universe as gods; this veneration involved calendrical observances.

Can this hypothesis find support and even be validated, at least to some extent, from other texts?⁵⁷ Two texts, both from the Wisdom of Solomon, appear to be especially pertinent:⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Colossians might also be invoked, but that is a difficult step since this letter was either written by Paul himself or a close disciple. It thus could be dependent on Galatians to some extent.

⁵⁸ Terms also found in Gal 4.3, 8–10 have been italicized.

Wis 7.17–19: ¹⁷For it is he [God] who gave me unerring knowledge of what exists, to know the structure of *the world* (σύστασιν κόσμου) and the activity of the *elements* (στοιχείων):⁵⁹ ¹⁸the beginning and end and middle of times, the alternations of the solstices and the changes of the *seasons* (καιροί), ¹⁹the cycles of the *year* (ἐνιαυτοῦ) and the constellations of the stars . . . (NRSV)

Wisdom 19.18–20 also mentions τὰ στοιχεῖα, earth, fire, and water being specifically named. The στοιχεῖα in Wis 7.17–19 probably, therefore, refer to the four elements. In this latter passage, they are juxtaposed, if not exactly identified, with references to ‘times’, ‘solstices’, ‘seasons’, ‘cycles of the year and the constellation of the stars’.⁶⁰

Wis 13.1–3: For all people who were ignorant of God . . . ² . . . supposed that either fire (πῦρ) or wind or swift air (ἀήρ), or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water (ῥόδωρ), or the luminaries of heaven were *the gods* that rule the world (πρυτάνεις κόσμου θεοὺς ἐνόμισαν). ³ If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be *gods* (ταῦτα θεοὺς ὑπελάμβανον), let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. (NRSV)⁶¹

Here the στοιχεῖα, though the word itself is not used, are lined up with the circle of the stars, and the luminaries of heaven, the rulers of the cosmos, as realities that non-Jews supposed to be gods.⁶² They are reduced to mere created beings by the author of Wisdom.

59 NRSV has a semi-colon here and the Greek text of Rahlfs’ standard edition of the LXX a comma. The colon suggests that what follows is a specification of ‘the activity of the elements (ἐνέργειαν στοιχείων)’.

60 Cf. Philo *Aet.* 107, 109–110: ‘there are four elements (στοιχεῖα), earth, water, air and fire, of which the world (ὁ κόσμος) is composed (συνέστηκε) . . . all these have transcendent powers (ὑπερβάλλουσαι γὰρ καὶ ἐν τούτοις εἰσὶ δυνάμεις) . . . For just as the annual seasons circle round and round, each making room for its successor as the years ceaselessly revolve, so, too, the elements of the world (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) in their mutual interchanges seem to die, yet, strangest of contradictions, are made immortal as they run their race backwards and forwards and continually pass along the same road up and down. . . .’ (LCL).

61 Cf. Philo *Vita cont.* 3–5: ‘Can we compare those who revere the elements (τοὺς τὰ στοιχεῖα τιμῶντας), earth, water, air, fire, which received different names from different peoples who call fire Hephaestus . . . , air Hera . . . , water Poseidon . . . , and earth Demeter . . . ? Sophists have invented these names for the elements (τὰ στοιχεῖα) but the elements themselves are lifeless matter (ἄψυχος ὕλη) incapable of movement of itself and laid by the Artificer as a substratum for every kind of shape and quality’ (LCL).

62 See Martyn, *Galatians*, 398. Martyn observes here (398 n. 39): ‘The claim that no pre-Pauline text includes the stars among the elements can be literally maintained even in the face of Wisdom 13, for the term *stoicheia* does not occur there. It seems clear, however, that in this text the author expands his other references to the elements (7:17; 19:18) to include the stars and, more broadly speaking, the luminaries of heaven’. Cf. *Jub.* 2.8–10; 1 *En.* 82.7–9.

Wisdom of Solomon is a Jewish text from the Diaspora⁶³ and it thus tells us of the way Jews there may have looked at pagan religious views and activities in connection with τὰ στοιχεῖα. Paul clearly shares the views about τὰ στοιχεῖα here expressed. I have not been able to find non-Jewish texts that *support* the hypothesis as clearly and unequivocally as these texts seem to,⁶⁴ so one could conclude that Paul has imposed a Jewish perspective on τὰ στοιχεῖα that may have borne no relationship to how the Galatians themselves regarded them, or related to them, before becoming believers in Christ.⁶⁵ Two factors suggest otherwise, however:

1. As the founder of the Galatian churches, Paul must have acquired some knowledge of their pre-Christian religious views. He talks of the Galatians ‘turning again’ (reconverting) to the στοιχεῖα.
2. Paul equates τὰ στοιχεῖα with the gods once worshiped by the Galatians and he does so without explanation or justification. The equation of τὰ στοιχεῖα with their previous gods seems to be a shared assumption.

The hypothesis that the Galatians once venerated the four elements of the universe as gods and that this veneration involved calendrical observances is thus not implausible.

The result of the foregoing analysis must be that the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in 4.3, a technical expression referring specifically to the four constituent elements of the physical universe, is being used by Paul as a *summary designation* for a complex of Galatian religious beliefs and practices at the center of which were the four elements of the physical cosmos to which the phrase concretely refers. In Paul’s usage, then, the phrase is an instance of *metonymy* whereby a trait or characteristic stands for a larger whole of which it is a part. In this case τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου – the four elements of physical reality – stand for the religion of the Galatians prior to them becoming believers in Christ. Calendrical observances and the physical phenomena associated with such observances – the movements of the sun, moon, planets, and stars – were an integral part of these religious beliefs and practices. The gods the Galatians worshiped were closely linked to the

⁶³ The same goes for the works of Philo cited in nn. 60 and 61.

⁶⁴ But see Martyn, *Galatians*, 396: ‘If . . . one of Paul’s Galatian churches was in Pessinus, it may be of some importance that Apuleius mentions the temple of Cybele there as the place in which the Phrygians reverence Isis under the name of “the Pessinuntine Mother of the Gods”. For in the same passage Apuleius identifies Isis as *elementorum omnium domina*, “mistress of all the elements” (*Metamorphoses* 11.5; cf. 11.25)’. See for further texts, Martyn, *Galatians*, 396 n. 34.

⁶⁵ Cf. Martyn, *Galatians*, 396: ‘In Paul’s time it is the common *Jewish* view that when Gentiles worship idols, they are in fact worshipping the elements’ (emphasis original).

four στοιχεῖα so that worship of these gods could be regarded as tantamount to the worship of τὰ στοιχεῖα themselves.⁶⁶

In sum, on the basis of points #1, #4 and #7 of the Interim Summary (Section IV above), we can conclude that the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in the context of Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia (1.2) is an instance of metonymy whereby Paul refers in summary fashion to the religious beliefs and practices associated in Galatia with the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) of the physical universe. This is how the Galatians would have understood the phrase (at least on a first reading) and how Paul meant them to hear it (at least initially).

VI. Τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου for Paul in the Context of his Argument in Galatians

A crucial problem, however, remains for the interpretation of Paul's text. How can he claim that 'we [Christians, both Jewish and Gentile] were [all once] enslaved under the religious beliefs and practices associated with the four elements of the physical universe' (4.3)? As the texts from Wisdom cited above show, Jews certainly did not venerate τὰ στοιχεῖα as gods.

For an answer, we may return to the four points listed in the Interim Summary (Section IV above) as representing Paul's own views on τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as he has formulated these views in the letter to the Galatians:⁶⁷

- #2. Existence ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου was a form of slavery, just like existence ὑπὸ νόμον.
- #3. Existence ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου was tantamount to existence ὑπὸ νόμον.
- #5. Τὰ στοιχεῖα are weak and impotent, just like the Law.
- #6. To turn to the observance of the Law is to return to the veneration of τὰ στοιχεῖα.

These four points all bring τὰ στοιχεῖα into some relationship to the Law and it would seem clear that Paul has introduced τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου into his argument for two reasons: first, to announce to the Galatians that their redemption from the religious beliefs and practices associated with τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσ-

⁶⁶ The στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου are not the stars, but a reference to them can imply the worship of stars or other heavenly bodies as appears to be the case in the context of Paul's letter to the Galatians (cf. Burton, *Galatians*, 516). If that were not so, Paul's mere reference to them as a shorthand way of describing the religious beliefs and practices of the Galatians would have been impossible, or non-sensical.

⁶⁷ The other three points also represent Paul's views, but in these four he distinguishes his understanding from that of the Galatians (prior to their reading his letter).

μου was, at the same time, their redemption from the Law (4.3–5), the Law that they are being asked to observe by the new preachers in Galatia; and second, as part of his overriding rhetorical strategy to dissuade the Galatians from turning to that Law (4.9). These two reasons obviously go together: if Paul succeeds in convincing the Galatians that they were also freed from the Law when they were freed from τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου he will have dissuaded them from turning to observance of the Law as the new preachers urgently recommend. He will have made the observance of the Law unnecessary in the eyes of the Galatians. As argued above, the expression τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου functions as a summary of the previous religion of the Galatians. By equating observance of the Law with their previous religion, Paul alerts the Galatians to the fact that by turning to the Law they are or will be back to where they began. And that means that their relationship to Christ will be at an end, a point he will drive home later, in 5.2–5, where he writes about being ‘severed from Christ’ and falling ‘away from grace’. Or as he says in 4.11: ‘I fear lest I have somehow labored in vain for you’. It will be as if he had never preached the gospel to the Galatians in the first place.

It is important to observe, however, that the *single* point at which the veneration of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is functionally and conceptually equivalent to the observance of the Law in Gal 4.1–11 is the *calendrical observances* mentioned in 4.10. It is on this basis, and on this basis alone, that Paul can write: ‘we [Christians, both Jewish and Gentile] were [all once] enslaved under the religious beliefs and practices associated with the four elements of the physical universe’. Paul’s rhetorical argument is based on the assumption that the calendrical observances required by the Law are no different in kind from the calendrical observances associated with τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. This is the *only* relevant point of contact in the passage between the observance of the Law and the veneration of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου.⁶⁸

The result of the foregoing analysis must then be that the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in the context of Paul’s argument in the letter to the Galatians is a summary designation for the religious beliefs and practices associated in Galatia with the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) of the physical universe, *in particular calendrical observances*.

VII. Summary

In investigating the meaning of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as used by Paul in his letter to the Galatians, I have come to two closely related conclusions. The first, found in the closing paragraphs of Section V above, is based on what the phrase probably meant in the historical, cultural context of the

68 There may have been others but Paul ignores them.

addressees for whom, as the letter itself indicates, the phrase already had a particular referential meaning and definite associations with certain religious beliefs and practices.

1. The phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in the context of Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia is an instance of metonymy whereby Paul refers in summary fashion to the religious beliefs and practices associated in Galatia with the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) of the physical universe.

The Galatians would have so understood the phrase (at least on a first reading of the letter) and Paul meant for them to so hear it (at least initially).⁶⁹

The second conclusion, drawn at the end of Section VI above, takes seriously the argumentative context in which Paul resorts to the phrase, i.e., his rhetorical and theological agenda:

2. The phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in the context of Paul's argument in the letter to the Galatians is a summary designation for the religious beliefs and practices associated with the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) of the physical universe, *in particular calendrical observances*.

Only in this limited sense does Paul's reference to (the veneration of) τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου function as an equivalent, or as a virtual equivalent, for (the observance of) the Law. The salient point for Paul in his attempt to keep the Galatians from becoming observers of the Law is that both the observance of the Law and their previous veneration of τὰ στοιχεῖα involve calendrical observances. On the

69 Martyn argues that Paul intends the Galatians to hear much more than this on *subsequent* readings of the letter. According to Martyn, Paul assumes that 'the Galatian congregations will listen to the whole of the epistle several times and with extreme care. He takes for granted, that is, not only great perspicacity but also considerable patience' (*Galatians*, 405). After such careful rereadings of the letter, and with the presumed perspicacity and patience, the Galatians will come to understand that Paul intends them to *reinterpret* the phrase by taking into account 'the baptismal reference to the termination of pairs of opposites' in 3.28 (Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female) and the 'climactic reference to the death of the cosmos made up of the first of those pairs' in 6.14–15 (405). The κόσμος referred to in the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is then the κόσμος about which Paul speaks in 6.14–15 (cf. Blinzler, 'Lexikalisches', 412: 'Das Rätsel seines Sprachgebrauchs löst sich, wenn man in Betracht zieht, dass bei ihm der Begriff Kosmos aus der Kategorie des Physikalisch-Gegenständlichen in die Kategorien des Ethisch-Zuständlichen transponiert ist'; Blinzler, like Martyn, appeals to Col 2.20 for support). The Galatians will thus come to understand that 'Paul *himself* 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' (404; emphasis added). The phrase pertains finally not 'to the sensible elements . . . but to the elements of religious distinction' (405–6). For the full argument, see Martyn, *Galatians*, 402–6.

basis of this one point of similarity, and this one point alone, Paul can assert that the observance of the Law is tantamount to the veneration of τὰ στοιχεῖα, that enslavement to the Law is no different from enslavement to τὰ στοιχεῖα and thus also that redemption from τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου was at the same time redemption from the Law.

This interpretation of the phrase dovetails nicely with Martyn's insight into 'the central question of the Galatian letter: What time is it?'.⁷⁰ This question lies prominently behind everything Paul says from 3.23 to 4.11, especially 3.25 ('Now that faith has come, we are *no longer* ὑπὸ παιδαγωγόν, i.e., ὑπὸ νόμον') and 4.4–7 ('When the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son . . . to redeem those ὑπὸ νόμον . . . so you are *no longer* a slave but a son'). By wanting to adopt 'the holy calendar' of the new preachers in Galatia, the Galatians 'are behaving as though Christ had not come, thereby showing that they do not know what time it is'.⁷¹ Paul's answer to this central question of the letter is 'apocalyptic' in character: 'It is the time after the apocalypse of the faith of Christ (3.23–25), the time of things being set right by that faith, the time of the presence of the Spirit, and thus the time of the war of liberation commenced by the Spirit'.⁷² Put otherwise, Paul announces to the Galatians that God's own (apocalyptic) 'time-keeping scheme' as revealed in Christ (4.4–5) has brought to an end the 'time-keeping schemes'⁷³ associated with τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, whether by Jews or by Gentiles.⁷⁴

70 'Apocalyptic Antinomies', in *Theological Issues*, 121; cf. *Galatians*, 23, where he adds a second, closely related question: 'In what cosmos do we actually live?'.

71 Martyn, *Galatians*, 418.

72 Martyn, 'Antinomies', 122.

73 The phrase has been adopted from Troy W. Martin, 'Time-Keeping Schemes'.

74 For possible theological implications, see Martyn, *Galatians*, 414–18: the apocalypse of Christ constitutes the end of religion with its distinction between sacred time and profane time (cf. also pp. 37–41).