

A Note on the “Elements of the Universe” (στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου)¹

The phrase the “elements of the world” (στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) appears three times in Paul’s letters (Col 2:8, 20; Gal 4:3; at v 9 the parallel expression τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα, “the weak and beggarly elements,” is used) and while it is of considerable importance for an understanding of the heresy propounded by the false teachers at Colossae, and the apostle’s answer to that false teaching, its meaning has been disputed since earliest times as Bandstra has shown in his history of the exegesis of these passages (*Law*, 5–30, especially 5–12).

The noun στοιχεῖον, which was probably derived from στοιχος (originally a military term meaning a “row”), had the connotation a “member of a row or series.” The earliest known reference was to a “shadow” by which time was reckoned (fifth-fourth cent. B.C., Aristophanes in *Ecclesiastus*, 651, cited by Bandstra, *Law*, 31). στοιχεῖον was essentially a “formal” word, similar to the English word “element” and capable of taking on new sets of meanings when applied to different contexts. So in Aristotle it connoted “letters” or “phonemes” of language, “notes” in a musical scale, “elementary principles” or “rules” in politics, geometrical and mathematical “propositions” basic to the proof of other propositions, and so on.

“Element” was a common word in the language of the philosophers particularly when they spoke of the matter or the elements out of which everything was formed. So Plato referred to the “primary elements (στοιχεῖα) of which we and all else are composed” (*Theaet* 201e). Zeno defined an element as “that from which particular things first come to be at their birth and into which they are finally resolved.” “Earth” (ἔλη), “fire” (πῦρ), “water” (ὔδωρ), and “air” (ἀήρ) are then mentioned as the four elements which constitute everything (Diogenes Laertius 7:136, 137). This meaning of “element” was widely known in the Hellenistic philosophical schools and was current in Hellenistic Judaism (4 Macc 12:13; Wisd 7:17; 19:18, etc cf. Lohse, 97, for references), though as one might expect in the latter it was given a distinctive theological twist: PhiloDeCher 127, “the four elements” (τὰ τέσσαρα στοιχεῖα) are the “material” (ἔλη) from which God fashioned the universe.

At this point it is necessary to note that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholars, in seeking to understand Paul’s use of this phrase “the elements of the world” (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) in Galatians and Colossians, have presented three major lines of interpretation as they have borne in mind that: (a) the meaning of στοιχεῖον varies considerably according to its contexts (much the same as the English word “element”); (b) Paul uses the phrase in polemical contests; (c) the errors combated in Galatians and Colossians while containing some similarities (references to Jewish regulations, and a relapse from the freedom of Christianity into some dogmatic system) are different at significant points; and (d) in Galatians 4 both Jews and Gentiles outside of Christ are under the “elements” (vv 3, 9). With individual variations the following are the main lines (cf. Bandstra, *Law*, 15–30):

¹O’Brien, P. T. (2002). *Vol. 44: Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*. Word Biblical Commentary (129). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

cent. century

cf. *confer*, compare

(1) The first approach takes its cue from στοιχεῖον as an “element” or “principle” and understands the phrase in question as the “principles of religious teaching or instruction,” which are usually associated with the immaturity of humanity prior to Christ. The main differences in this general approach are whether στοιχεῖα points to the Jewish law alone (so de Wette), or to principles common to both Jewish and Gentile religion (Meyer, B. Weiss, Lightfoot), and whether κόσμος (“world”) denotes the whole of humanity outside of Christ or the external material world.

Among twentieth century exponents of this view Ewald drew attention to the extra-Christian world’s deficiency in knowledge, στοιχεῖα denoted the “elements of knowledge” which represented the age of minority. Burton, after a lengthy note in his commentary on Galatians, concluded the phrase meant “the rudimentary religious teachings possessed by the (human) race,” a view similar to that of Strack-Billerbeck. Moule admitted that in this context of Colossians although belief in demonic powers was present, because of the absence of evidence outside the NT for this meaning of the term στοιχεῖα until later times, he preferred the rendering “elementary teaching”—that teaching by Judaistic or pagan ritualists, “a ‘materialistic’ teaching bound up with ‘this world’ alone, and contrary to the freedom of the Spirit” (Moule, 92; cf. BAG, 768, 769, which lists “fundamental principles” as a possible meaning of the phrase in both Galatians and Colossians).

Bandstra’s own view which falls within this general approach begins with the meaning of στοιχεῖον as “inherent component.” Inextricably bound up with this is the notion of “power” or “force.” The term κόσμος is not understood in the sense of “universe” (as most moderns take it here) but denotes “that whole sphere of human activity which stands over against Christ and His salvation, not considered first of all as inherently and structurally evil, but ... which is ineffectual for overcoming sin and ... for bringing salvation” (*Law*, 57). The στοιχεῖα are the basic components of this area of activity—they are, Bandstra concludes after an exegetical examination of Galatians 4 and Colossians 2, the *law* and the *flesh*. These were the “two fundamental cosmical forces” which held Jews and Gentiles alike in bondage and from which men and women needed to be freed by Christ’s death. Some of the phrases in the Colossians paragraph seem to have been chosen to cover both Jewish and pagan items: so “tradition of men” is “not necessarily to be limited to [the] Jewish tradition of the fathers, but could include all sorts of tradition common to mankind” (*Law*, 70), while “philosophy” probably includes a reference to the Mosaic law but is broader than this.

Bandstra’s approach, which interprets the στοιχεῖα as the “law” and the “flesh” (unregenerate human nature), two elemental forces in the world operating before Christ and apart from him, could be seen as being in line with Paul’s general teaching. However, several comments may be made: (a) his case has been worked out with special reference to Galatians and has not paid sufficient attention to the distinctive features in Colossians. (b) It is hardly correct to speak of the “law” and the “flesh” as the basic structural entities outside of Christ. (c) The real weakness of this approach which interprets στοιχεῖα as “elements” in the sense of “principles” is that Paul speaks of them in a rather personal fashion (at Gal 4:3, 9 they seem to be conceived of as angelic powers), and in contexts where other personal beings or forces are referred to (at Col 2:10, 15,

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BAG W. Bauer, W. F. Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Chicago: Chicago U. P., 1979)

demonic principalities desire to exercise their tyranny over men). (d) Finally, this line does not pay sufficient attention successively to the developing evidence (admittedly some is second century A.D. material) from Jewish sources indicating a belief in angels governing and being active in the forces of nature, the other evidence to show that similar ideas were present in contemporary pagan and syncretistic religions, and the importance of the spirit world in NT thought generally.

(2) A second interpretation has been called the “cosmological” view. The term κόσμος (“world”) in the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου was understood to refer to the material, visible world while στοιχεῖα denoted the elemental parts of that world. Zahn, for example, argued that Paul understood by the expression “nothing but the κόσμος itself, and this as composed of manifold material elements” while Kögel considered that being bound to material things was the point of comparison between the observance of the Jewish law and the practices of pagan religions.

Recently Schweizer (*Jews, Greeks and Christians*, 249–55; cf. his commentary, 100–107) has argued that since all the parallels to the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (“the elements of the universe”) outside the NT do not designate anything other than the elements earth, water, air and fire (cf. Blinzler, *Studiorum*, 438–41) it is difficult to understand it differently in Colossians 2:8 and 20. A connection between the term “elements” and stars or their deities, spirits or demons cannot be found before the second century A.D. Philo proves that his readers were expected to understand the term in its normal physical understanding without any overtones pointing to their demonic character (*Her* 140; *Abr* 162, etc), while the total absence of the phrase in all the Pauline (or post-Pauline) lists of powers, thrones, authorities, principalities, dominions, and so on argues, according to Schweizer, in this same direction. The phrase would be expected at Colossians 1:16; 2:10 or 2:15 if it denoted demons. Schweizer further suggested that the Colossian “philosophy” had been influenced by Pythagorean ideas in which cosmic speculation had already been ethicized (see the introduction on the nature of the Colossian philosophy). The elements exercise power in much the same way that the law does (note the points of contact with Bandstra’s view above). Because the impure soul cannot ascend to the highest divine element it would be driven back to the lower elements, to the air, the sea, and the earth. So, purification of the soul by abstinence from meat, and so on, was a matter of life and death, and became a kind of slavery to innumerable legalistic demands.

(3) The majority of commentators this century have understood the “elements of the world” in Galatians and Colossians as denoting spiritual beings, regarded as personal and active in the physical and heavenly elements. From early times the stars and powers thought to control the universe were worshiped and given offerings. Later in the Hellenistic period this homage was justified by pointing out that man was fashioned from the same elements of the cosmos.

The term στοιχεῖα was applied, as we have seen, to the physical components of the universe—earth, fire, water and air (PhiloQuis 134; cf. 2 Pet 3:10, 12). In Hellenistic syncretism the teaching about the elements was “mythologized” so that they were thought to be under the control of spirit powers. Along with the stars and heavenly bodies these were described as personal beings believed to control man’s destiny. At a later time the *Testament of Solomon* can describe the “elements” as the “cosmic rulers of darkness” (8:2), while the stars whose constellations controlled the universe and in particular man’s fate were also styled “elements” (στοιχεῖα; Ps-Calisthenes 1, 12, 1). Men must not only possess knowledge about these elements but also reve-

rence these principalities and powers submitting to the rules and regulations imposed on one's life. (Because of contextual considerations in Col 2, Lohse, 99, and others have argued that too much weight should not be placed on the lack of explicit usage of τὰ στοιχεῖα as "elemental spirits" in the pre-Pauline writings.)

Although in Judaism worship was offered to the one true God, increasing prominence was given to angels. Jewish apocalyptic literature had already associated angels closely with the heavenly powers. According to Jubilees 2:2 each of the elements had its own angel to rule over it, while in 1 Enoch 60:11, 12 reference is made to the spirits of the various natural elements (cf. 1 Enoch 43:1, 2; 80:6; 2 Enoch 4:1, 2, etc). Three times in the NT (Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19 and Heb 2:2) the Jewish tradition regarding the angelic mediation of the law (absent from the Pentateuchal account of the law-giving) is mentioned, and in Galatians 4:3 some close connection between (or identification of) these angels and the στοιχεῖα is required.

It is probable that in the syncretistic teaching being advocated at Colossae these στοιχεῖα were grouped with the angels and seen as controlling the heavenly realm and man's access to God's presence. One way they could be placated was by rigorously subduing the flesh so as to gain visionary experiences of the heavenly dimension and to participate in their angelic liturgy (see the discussion on 2:18). By this the devotees gained fullness of salvation, reached the divine presence and attained the esoteric knowledge which accompanied such visions. Christ had in effect become just another intermediary between God and man.