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TA STOICHEIA TOU KOSMOU (GAL 4:3)

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The exact meaning of the phrase *ta stoicheia tou kosmou*, translated in the *RSV* as "the elemental spirits of the universe," has been difficult to ascertain. The Church fathers debate its significance, and modern scholars have also continued to find the subject a fruitful field for discussion. No less than two doctoral dissertations have been devoted to the topic in the past twenty-five years, both having copious bibliographies of relevant articles and books published in this century.[1]

The purpose of the present study is to briefly survey the history of the various interpretations of the phrase and to suggest the most accurate interpretation based on the accumulated contextual, historical and philological evidence.

The phrase *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* appears three times in Paul's writings in the NT: Gal 4:3 and Col 2:8, 20. While its usage in Colossians will be of some importance in determining the meaning, attention will be focused primarily on its occurrence in Gal 4:3 and the closely related phrase in Gal 4:9, *ta asthenē kai ptōcha stoicheia* ("the weak and beggarly elements").

I. CONTEXT OF THE PHRASE IN GALATIANS

Paul's letter to the Galatians was written in the middle of the first Christian century to the churches of the Roman province of Galatia in central Asia Minor.[2] It is likely that these churches were those established by Paul in Antioch (of Pisidia), Iconium, Lystra and Derbe during his first missionary journey as recorded in Acts 13–14. In this epistle the apostle expresses amazement that the recipients are so quickly deserting the gospel he preached to them in favor of a distorted "gospel" proclaimed by certain ones causing a disturbance among them (Gal 1:6–7). It is made evident in 1:1–10 that these opponents have challenged Paul's authority by

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[1] A. J. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World: An Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul's Teaching* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1964); C. J. Kurapati, *Spiritual Bondage and Christian Freedom According to Paul* (dissertation; Princeton Theological Seminary, 1976).

[2] The Pauline authorship of both Galatians and Ephesians is assumed, as well as the South Galatian theory regarding the destination of the former. While the defense of either of these assumptions is beyond the scope of this paper, one may consult D. Guthrie's *New Testament Introduction* or the several commentaries on Galatians by F. F. Bruce for arguments in favor of these views.

suggesting that Paul's apostleship is secondary ("through the agency of men," specifically the twelve), and hence his gospel of justification by faith apart from works of the law is spurious, having been designed merely "to please men."

Paul's proposition in the autobiographical section (chaps. 1–2) is stated in 1:11–12: "The gospel which was preached by me is not according to man, for I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." Paul then defends this proposition by carefully recounting his pre-Christian experiences (1:13–14), the circumstances of his conversion (1:15–17), and every opportunity of coming under the influence of the twelve in Jerusalem (1:18–2:10) in order to show that at no time did he receive instruction and/or commission by them. While Paul's gospel and apostleship were both received independently from the twelve, those "reputed to be pillars" recognized the truth of his gospel and acknowledged the genuineness of his apostleship. In fact, on one occasion in Antioch Paul openly opposed Peter because of his hypocrisy in yielding to those Judaizers who demanded the observance of circumcision and Jewish food laws (2:11–21). The last paragraph, with the positive emphasis on justification by faith in Jesus Christ, and the triple negation of justification by the works of the law in 2:16 forms a transition to the theological section (chaps. 3–4).

In Galatians 3 Paul defends the doctrine of justification by faith by appealing to (1) the experience of the Galatians themselves (3:1–5), (2) the Scriptural teaching that Abraham's faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness" (3:6–9), (3) the fact that the law does not justify but rather brings people under condemnation, whereas the promise of the Spirit comes through faith (3:10–14), and (4) the teaching that the law, coming 430 years later, does not invalidate a previously established covenant based on God's promise (3:15–18). These arguments raise the question: "Why the law then?" Paul's answer is to the effect that while the law is not contrary to God's promises, it operates in a different sphere: Law was added because of transgression, to convict people of sin, but is powerless to impart life. But the law is not only secondary to the unmediated promise by faith in Jesus Christ ("ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator"). It is also temporary, "until the seed should come" (3:19–22).

Paul continues to defend the doctrine of justification by faith by noting the contrast between one's inferior condition under the law and one's superior condition of faith. Before the faith came we were "kept in custody," "shut up," and under a stern *paidagōgos* ("custodian"). But now that the faith has come we are "all sons of God," "all one in Christ," and "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (3:23–29). The metaphors change slightly in 4:1–7 as the analogy of the *paidagōgos* yields to the illustration of a son in a patrician household, but the emphasis is essentially the same. The heir, potentially owner of everything in his father's household, is no different from a slave while he is an immature child (*nēpios*), because he is under "guardians and managers." But when God sent forth his Son "in the fullness of time," it was for the purpose of redeeming

those under the law (the "guardians and managers") with the result that they are no longer *nēpioi* ("immature children"), equivalent to *douloi* ("slaves"), but rather *huioi* ("sons") and *klēronomoi* ("heirs").

It is instructive to note at this point that the immediate context of Gal 4:3 is concerned with the inferior status of certain people during a previous time when they were confined under law and imprisoned (3:23), under a tutor (3:25), no different from a slave (4:1), under guardians and managers (4:2), "enslaved under the elements of the world" (4:3), and under law (4:5).

Here one must address the significance of *hēmeis* ("we") in 4:3 in light of the we/you interchange in 3:23–4:11. Does it include the Jewish Christians in Galatia, the Gentile Christians in Galatia, or both? The answer to this question, helpful in determining the meaning of *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* in this passage, is likewise difficult. Bandstra,[3] Zahn, and Cramer[4] argue that *hēmeis* refers only to the Jews who have become Christians. Kurapati, like Augustine, says it signifies Gentile Christians.[5] The majority of scholars, however, including Burton, Lightfoot, Kean, Reicke, Ramsay and Rendall, are probably more correct in setting forth the position that the "we" is inclusive of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

To support this, Rendall carefully treats the context, beginning with 3:17 where Paul begins dealing with the position of Israelites under the law before the advent of Christ. In 3:22 *ta panta* speaks of the whole Jewish nation. Then 3:23–25 explains the position of the faithful under the "tutelage" of the law and uses the first-person plural (we) to denote their association with Jewish Christians. The sudden change from first-person plural to second-person plural (you) in 3:26–29 indicates an extension in the point of view from Israel to the Gentile world. Paul turns to his converts in Galatia, largely from the Gentile world, and assures them: "You are all sons of God through faith, whatever your race, Jew or Greek," and emphatically: "You are all one in Christ Jesus." In 4:1–7 Paul extends his view of the world before Christ so as to include the Gentile: "Amidst the heathen were other children of God . . . potential heirs of salvation, who passed through a like stage of spiritual childhood under different conditions . . . like orphan children." The illustration of 4:1–2, says Rendall, is reflective of the testamentary systems prevalent among Greeks and Romans, so that *nēpioi* in 4:3 suggests primarily the underdeveloped spiritual life through which the Gentile converts had passed but also that of Jewish Christians. Consequently whatever *stoicheia* means it must apply in some way to both Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, since 4:4–5 state that God's Son "was born under law in order that he might redeem those who were under law," the context suggests that the principle of law is one understanding of *stoicheia* that must be considered. As Rendall notes, Christ was made subject not only to Jewish law (*tôrâ*) but also to Roman

[3] Bandstra, *Law* 59–60.

[4] A. W. Cramer, *Stoicheia tou kosmou: Interpretatie van een Nieuw Testamentische term* (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1961) 175.

[5] Kurapati, *Spiritual* 60–61.

law, and he died by its sentence.[6] It appears from the context, at any rate, that the "we" in 4:3 refers to both Jews and Gentiles who, prior to the Christian faith, were held in bondage under *ta stoicheia tou kosmou.*

II. VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF *STOICHEIA*

Stoicheia, the neuter plural form of the adjective *stoicheios*, "standing in a row," is derived from the root *stoichos*, "row," "rank." Thus *stoicheion* (neuter singular) comes to mean basically "a member of a row" or "what belongs to a series." By the end of the fourth century B.C. it had taken on a variety of meanings such as "battle line," "line of verse," or "shadow on a sundial." It was chiefly used by Plato with the meaning "part of a word." Aristotle defined it as "that from which as a constituent first principle, indivisible into other kinds of things, things of other kinds are produced." He used it to refer to letters of the alphabet, notes on a musical scale, elementary rules in politics, geometrical axioms basic to the proof of other propositions, and component parts of physical elements of the universe. *Stoicheia* can mean "elementary principles of knowledge or instruction," as in Euclid's work on mathematics. The stoics spoke of four *stoicheia*, the elements of earth, water, air and fire. In the early centuries of the Christian era *stoicheia* is applied to the heavenly bodies, especially the stars (composed of fire, the chief and finest element), the twelve signs of the zodiac, and then the elemental spirits or astral spirits—that is, the gods or demons associated with these elements or heavenly bodies. Finally it has been noted that in modern Greek *stoicheion* means "angel, spirit, ghost."[7]

The terminology employed by Bandstra and Kurapati in delineating the three major categories of interpretations of *ta stoicheia tou kosmou*—namely, principial, cosmological, and personalized-cosmological—will be used to facilitate the following historical survey of suggested meanings.

1. *The principial interpretation understands* stoicheia *to mean the rudimentary principles of anything*, as illustrated by Euclid writing about the *stoicheia* of mathematics. In the patristic period Clement of Alexandria understands the phrase in Colossians and Ephesians to refer to Greek philosophy and the Jewish religion, both being types of elementary education. Origen quotes Gal 4:1–2 in viewing the law and prophets as elementary disciplines for the gospel. Jerome, noting that the majority were of a different persuasion, quotes Heb 5:12 for support of his interpretation of the phrase as being the law of Moses and the declarations of the prophets.[8]

[6] F. Rendall, "The Epistle to the Galatians," in *The Expositors Greek Testament* (ed. W. R. Nicoll; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 173–176.

[7] E. D. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (New York: Scribner's, 1928) 510–513; G. Delling, "*Stoicheion*," *TDNT* 7 (1971) 670–683; H.-H. Esser, "Law, Customs, Elements," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2. 451–452; MM 591.

[8] Bandstra, *Law* 5–7.

In the Reformation period Luther and Calvin interpret *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* primarily as the OT law, with emphasis on ceremonial legislation that concerns earthly matters.[9] Hugo Grotius developed the idea that the *stoicheia* are the elements of piety held in common by Jews and pagans: temples, altars, libations, calendars, festivals, and so forth.

In the post-Reformation period Lightfoot views it as the rudimentary instruction of both Gentiles and Jews. Similarly, H. A. W. Meyer understands the phrase to signify *rudimenta rituali*, the ceremonial character of both Judaism and heathenism.[10] D. A. Black concurs with the conclusion of Burton who says, in a lengthy excursus, that the whole expression means "the rudimentary religious teaching possessed by the race."[11] Delling suggests the reference is to "religion before and outside of Christ," and Cramer translates the phrase as "the elements of the religious-moral habit of the old man."[12] After observing that *stoicheion* has a formal meaning of "inherent component" and is capable of a wide variety of specific meanings as determined by the context, Bandstra concludes that the phrase *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* in Galatians and Colossians "refers specifically to the law and the flesh as the two interactive, fundamental forces operative in human existence before and outside of Christ."[13]

2. *The cosmological interpretation understands* stoicheia *to be a formal word for the material components of the cosmos*, as illustrated in Plato, Aristotle, and the stoic philosophers. This is apparently the most logical meaning of the term in 2 Pet 3:10, 12, and it is taken up by many in the patristic period. It is interesting that in at least one of his writings (*Protrepticus*) Clement of Alexandria opts for this interpretation, identifying the "weak and beggarly elements" as the earth, water, fire and air reverenced by people. Chrysostom understood *stoicheia* to be the heavenly bodies that determine the New Moons and Sabbaths.[14]

In the post-Reformation period this viewpoint is represented by Van Wageningen who, noting that the stoics often observed the signs of the zodiac, understood the context of Gal 4:10 to give *stoicheia* the meaning "heavenly bodies." N. W. DeWitt thinks Paul had in mind Epicurus' dictum that "the universe consists of atoms and space." Those who believe this theory, then, are in bondage to mere specks of matter.[15]

3. *The personalized-cosmological interpretation understands* stoicheia *to refer to personalized powers or spiritual beings, such as elemental spirits or astral spirits.* This meaning arose because of the association of spirit-beings with the elements and subsequently the connection between the

[9] Kurapati, *Spiritual* 48.

[10] Bandstra, *Law* 16.

[11] D. A. Black, "Weakness Language in Galatians," *GTJ* 4 (Spring 1983) 19; Burton, *Commentary* 518.

[12] Delling, *"Stoicheion"* 686; Cramer, *Stoicheia* 176.

[13] Bandstra, *Law* i, 46.

[14] Ibid. 6, 8.

[15] Ibid. 23–24.

element of fire and the stars, to whom astrology gave the names of ancient gods. Kurapati notes that for stoics, Pythagoreans and neo-Platonists the stars were gods, and "the ancients were inclined to think that stars, sun, and moon influenced earthly events, weather, and growth."[16]

In the patristic period this view had many advocates. Tatian apparently had this in mind when, in *Address to the Greeks* 21.3, he denigrates the practice of those pagans who "pay religious homage to the natural elements." Athenagoras, in *A Plea for Christians* 10.3 in rejecting the charge of atheism, acknowledges that Christians recognize that God appointed the angels to their "several posts about the elements, and the heavens and the world," but Christians do not "descend to the 'poor and weak elements' and we do not approach and do homage to the powers" (16:2–3). He goes on to deny paying homage to the elements or worshiping them as gods. In his *Second Apology* (mid-second century A.D.) Justin Martyr remarks that when God arranged "the heavenly elements" for the increase of fruits and the rotation of the seasons he "committed the care of men and of all things under heaven to angels whom he appointed over them."[17]

Jerome, who himself holds another view, notes that some hold the "elements" to be the angels who are over the four elements (cf. Ps 104:4; Heb 1:7; Rev 7:1; 14:18; 16:5 for angels associated with wind, fire and water). Tertullian in *Adversus Marcionem* suggests that in Gal 4:8 Paul was refuting the superstition that held the elements to be gods, and in the context of his statement he seems to mean the sun, moon and stars. Theodore of Mopsuestia follows suit, understanding *stoicheia* to refer to the sun, moon and stars, elements that the days, months and seasons are derived from and that the heathen entreated as gods. Augustine identifies the *elementa mundi* with the sun, moon and stars, those that "by nature are no gods" (Gal 4:8) but that are worshiped by the Gentiles.[18]

Related to the patristic age or just prior to it are some pseudepigrapha that yield significant data. *1 Enoch* 21:3, dating from the third or second century B.C., associates the seven stars of heaven, which transgressed the commandment of the Lord, with the fallen angels. *1 Enoch* 60:11–24 (first century B.C.) associates spirits with winds, moon, stars, sea, snow, rain, and so forth. (The term *stoicheia*, however, is not used.) *2 Enoch*, which originally goes back to the first century A.D. prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, refers to two hundred angels who rule the stars (4:1–2), the angels who keep the treasure house of snow (5:1), the flying elements of the sun, called Phoenixes and Chalkydri, who accompany the sun, bearing heat and dew (12:1; 15:1), and "the heavenly winds, and spirits and elements and angels flying" (16:7). It must be noted, however, that although

[16] Kurapati, *Spiritual* 45–46.

[17] *The Ante-Nicene Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (ed. A. C. Coxe; New York: Burr, 1885) 190.

[18] Bandstra, *Law* 9–11.

the *stoicheia* are associated with the angels and spirits they are never identified with one another.[19]

The *Testament of Solomon* contains the first explicit identification of *stoicheia* with demonic spirits. In this pseudepigraphal work Solomon summons before him all the demons, asks each his or her name, the name of his or her star or zodiacal sign, and the particular (good) angel to whose influence it must submit. In 4:6 the female demon Onoskelis speaks of men who "worship my star." In 8:2 the seven female spirits answer Solomon: "We are of the 33 (36) *stoicheia* of the *kosmokratores* (world-rulers) of the darkness . . . and our stars are in heaven . . . and we are called as it were goddesses." In chap. 18 there are thirty-six spirits who come before Solomon, saying, "We are the 36 *stoicheia*, the *kosmokratores* of this darkness" (cf. Eph 6:12). It appears, based on the information given for the first three, that the thirty-six are in twelve groups of three each, with each group comprising a decanus of the zodiacal circle. Although Conybeare suggests that the *Testament of Solomon* comes from an original Jewish document reworked by a Christian as early as A.D. 100, most scholars reject this early dating. McCown argues for an early third-century date for the original compilation.[20]

In the post-Reformation period this personalized-cosmological view has been overwhelmingly accepted, especially in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hincks follows the lead of earlier writers (Klopper, Spitta, Everling, etc.) in identifying the *stoicheia* with heathen deities, the unseen spirits that acted in the forces of nature, what Paul calls elsewhere "principalities and powers."[21] Kean, who coined the term stoicheiolatry, bases his interpretation of Gal 4:1–10 on the meaning of *stoicheion* in modern Greek (i.e. spirits of trees and fountains, etc.) and v. 8, "those that by nature are no gods." He argues that *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* refers to both the rites and ceremonies of the Gentiles' nature-worship and the circumcision, purification, New Moons, and so on, of Judaism, so that both heathenism and Judaism are stoicheiolatry.[22] Easton surveys the extent of the influence of Hellenism on Paul and argues that Gal 4:8–11 demands that *stoicheia* be understood as the former deities of the Galatians, a relapse into their former heathenism. The divisions of time mentioned in 4:10, he says, "are precisely what the astral beings determine!" Easton further identifies Jewish legalism with heathenism in regard to Jewish angelology wherein it was taught that God governed the world through his angels and gave the law through the angels (cf. Gal 3:19; Col 2:18).[23]

[19] *APOT*, vol. 2; J. H. Charlesworth, *The Pseudepigrapha and Modern Research with a Supplement* (Chico: Scholars, 1981) 98.

[20] F. C. Conybeare, "The Testament of Solomon," *JQR* 11 (October 1898) 2, 3, 24, 34–38; H. F. D. Sparks, *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); Charlesworth, *Pseudigrapha* 197–198.

[21] E. Y. Hincks, "The Meaning of the Phrase *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* in Galatians 4:3 and Colossians 2:8," *JBL* 15 (1896) 189.

[22] W. Kean, "Stoicheiolatry," *ExpTim* 8 (August 1897) 515.

[23] B. S. Easton, "The Pauline Theology and Hellenism," *AJT* 21 (1917) 359, 361, 363, 369–370.

Hatch proposes that the third-century work entitled *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*, which uses the Syriac equivalent of *stoicheia* with reference to personal cosmic powers (sun, moon, stars, sea, winds, earth), shows clearly the meaning that the inhabitants of Mesopotamia would have understood Paul to intend when writing to the Galatians and Colossians.[24]

Reicke, noting that the phrase "under law" is synonymous with the expression "to the elements of the world," argues that there is an analogy between the law and the elements of the world, just as there is between Judaism and heathenism. Specifically the "elemental spirits" of heathenism may be associated with the angelic powers in Gal 3:19 who establish the law.[25] Deissmann also thinks that Gal 4:3 refers to "cosmic spiritual beings"—that is, the angels by whom the law was ordained—and that Gal 4:9 refers to the "heathen deities whom the Galatians had formerly served."[26]

In the latter half of the twentieth century MacGregor, Caird and Schlier have all written extensively on the subject of "principalities and powers" in the NT and especially in Pauline thought. MacGregor relates *archai* and *exousiai* to the expressions *kosmokratores* (Eph 6:12) and *stoicheia*. They suggest the cosmic spirits, a concept derived from astral beliefs in both the Judaism and Hellenism of Paul's environment. Caird rightly asserts that "the concept of world powers reaches into every department of Paul's theology and cannot be dismissed as a survival of primitive superstition." Caird proposes that *ta stoicheia* refers to the elemental spirits by which both Jew and Gentile were held in bondage, having close links with the law on one hand and astrology on the other. "When the Law is isolated and exalted into an independent system of religion," says Caird, "it becomes demonic." Therefore the demonic forces of legalism, both Jewish and Gentile, can be called "principalities and powers" or "elemental spirits of the world." Schlier suggests that *stoicheia* in Galatians and Colossians is interchangeable with "principalities and powers," "dominions," "thrones," "gods," "angels," "demons," "evil spirits," and so on. "These 'elements,'" says Schlier, "are probably the stars under whose influence the Galatians had felt bound to observe certain sidereal festivals."[27] Similarly F. F. Bruce argues that the context, especially 4:9–10, demands the meaning "lords of the planetary spheres," the forces believed to control the sun and moon and therefore the calendar. Bruce combines the "good" angels of Gal 3:19 and the "hostile" angels of Eph 6:12 under the "elements of the world."[28]

In response to Bandstra and Delling who claim there is no source prior to Justin Martyr (second century) in which *stoicheion* clearly means "god" or "spirit," and Burton who says there is no definite evidence for this

[24] W. H. P. Hatch, "*Ta stoicheia* in Paul and Bardaisan," *JTS* 28 (1926–27) 181–182.

[25] B. Reicke, "The Law and This World According to Paul," *JBL* 20 (1951) 259–263.

[26] MM 519.

[27] G. H. C. MacGregor, "Principalities and Powers," *NTS* 1 (1954–55) 18–20; G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956) viii, 41, 51; H. Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1961) 11, 14, 23.

[28] F. F. Bruce, "The Colossian Heresy," *BSac* 141 (July 1984) 204–205.

meaning before the *Testament of Solomon* (third century), Kurapati introduces two fresh items for consideration. First, he links Gal 4:8–10, 14b with the narrative of Acts 14:8–18 where it is recorded that Paul and Barnabas in Lystra (in the Roman province of Galatia) are worshiped as Hermes (Mercury) and Zeus (Jupiter) respectively. The Galatians' activities, including the offering of sacrifices at the nearby temple of Zeus, indicates their former bondage to the elemental spirits of the universe. He notes how Paul urges them to turn (*epistrephein*) from the vain things (Acts 14:15), as he urges in Gal 4:9 that his readers not turn back again (*epistrephein palin*) to the weak and beggarly *stoicheia*.

Second, Kurapati discusses a Greek papyrus bearing testimony to a horoscope that, he claims, dates back to A.D. 81. Line 60 contains a reference to Dios (= Zeus), king of the Greek pantheon. This Dios is associated with the *stoicheion* who determines the destiny of the individual. He concludes that the *stoicheion* has a relation to the spiritual being called Zeus and furthermore that "the idea of *stoicheion* representing astral influence was circulating during Paul's time. Therefore, bondage to *stoicheia*, according to Paul, means life dominated by the tyranny of astral spirits."[29]

III. TOWARD AN ACCURATE INTERPRETATION

In the attempt to ascertain the most probable meaning Paul intended for the phrase *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* in Gal 4:3, it will be convenient to first observe the weaknesses of the cosmological and personalized-cosmological interpretations. In dismissing the cosmological view, Walter Wink notes that no convincing pre-Christian evidence exists for the identification of *stoicheia* with the heavenly bodies, the earliest references coming from the end of the second century A.D.[30] Furthermore, if the majority of scholars are correct in identifying the *hēmeis* of Gal 4:3 with both Jewish and Gentile Christians it is difficult to see how Jewish Christians could be understood to have been subject to the four elements (earth, air, fire, water).

The context is also a major factor in telling against the personalized-cosmological view, for if *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* refers to astral spirits or elemental spirits it must apply to the preconversion experience of both Jewish and Gentile Christians in Galatia. The 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.

Additionally this view fails to pass the scrutiny of strict philology. In decrying the almost wholesale swing of scholarly opinion in the twentieth century to the personalized-cosmological view, Wink notes that this occurred "despite the utter lack of a single scrap of evidence that anyone prior to the third century C.E. had regarded the *stoicheia* as personal beings, fallen angels, or demons in any form." Wink gives no evidence of familiarity with Kurapati's

[29] Kurapati, *Spiritual* 56–57, 72–74.

[30] W. Wink, "The 'Elements of the Universe' in Biblical and Scientific Perspective," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 13 (September 1978) 244.

dissertation and therefore perhaps dismisses the philological arguments too quickly. It is necessary to respond to Kurapati's evidence of *stoicheion* occurring in conjunction with Zeus (*stoicheioi Dios*) in lines 60–61 of Papyrus 130, a horoscope that dates itself April 1, A.D. 81, and of the Galatians of Lystra who worshiped Zeus (Acts 14:11–13). First, note that Acts 14 itself does not identify Zeus and Hermes as *stoicheia*. Second, the date of Papyrus 130 is most likely incorrect, since the use of the title *theos* (= *divus*) for the emperor Titus indicates that the document itself was not composed until after the emperor's death. The horoscope, then, could date from the second century. Even if the date A.D. 81 is correct, however, that is still a few decades after Paul wrote Galatians and cannot be offered as incontrovertible evidence that *stoicheia* was used in Paul's day to mean gods or astral spirits.

Furthermore the 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.

The meaning of *kosmos* ("world") in *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* (Gal 4:3) is variously interpreted since it has a wide range of meanings in the NT. The context here suggests it designates not primarily the universe, or the earth, but the people who live on the earth—that is, humanity. *Kosmou* is probably best understood as a possessive genitive in Gal 4:3: "the *stoicheia* possessed by the peoples of the world."[31]

As to the meaning of *stoicheia*, Wink rightly concurs with Bandstra that "it is a generic term or a 'formal word,' which of itself has no specific content. It denotes merely an irreducible component; what it is an irreducible component of must be supplied by the context in which it is used." Wink proceeds to demonstrate that we use the English word "element" in precisely the same way.[32] Therefore the same meaning must not be pressed on every occurrence of *stoicheia* in Gal 4:3, 9; Col 2:8, 20; Heb 5:12; 2 Pet 3:10, 12. It is inappropriate to interpret Galatians 4 necessarily in the same terms as Colossians 2 since the contexts differ.

Since it has been determined above that the context of Gal 4:3 gives *stoicheia* a specific meaning that must be applicable to both Jewish and Gentile Christians, it seems that the meaning would be "the rudimentary religious teachings possessed by the race" or "the rudimentary teaching regarding rules, regulations, laws, and religious ordinances by means of which both Jews and Gentiles, each in their own way, tried to earn their salvation."[33] This certainly includes not only the ceremonial law for the Jews, the elementary rules and rituals that characterize Judaism, but also

[31] R. G. Bratcher, "The Meaning of *Kosmos*, 'World,' in the New Testament," *BT* 31 (October 1980) 432–433.

[32] Wink, "'Elements'" 227.

[33] Burton, *Commentary* 518; Black, "Weakness" 19.

the religious observances common to paganism. Both are simply different forms of bondage.

In Gal 4:9 Paul addresses *hymeis* ("you" = Gentiles) when asking how the Galatian converts from paganism could turn back again to the "weak and worthless *stoicheia*." The context in 4:8–11 ("You were slaves to those which by nature are no gods" and "You observe days and months and seasons and years") naturally suggests the specific meaning of the heathen cultus, the enslaving teachings followed by the Gentiles in their attempt to achieve salvation. In fact the observance of days, months, seasons and years implies cultic activities known to both paganism and Judaism, and thus the Gentile converts' relapse into Jewish legalism may be rightly termed a return to the weak and beggarly elements.[34]

IV. CONCLUSION

J. S. Stewart is undoubtedly correct in saying that the dimension of the demonic has largely been a "Neglected Emphasis in New Testament Theology."[35] Certainly Freud's psychology and Bultmann's demythologization have been prime contributors to this elimination of attention to the demonic in modern Christian theology and praxis. Although it is often suggested that these phenomena (principalities and powers, etc.) are "merely fictions of ancient mythology," the NT attaches great significance to them.[36] Caird argues that "Paul is using mythological language, but his language has a rational content of thought."[37] Indeed, a most significant aspect of the redemption provided in Christ's ministry was the disarming of principalities and powers, making a show of them openly, triumphing over them at the cross (Col 2:15).

In an effort to recapture this important and integral aspect of the primitive Christian proclamation, however, one must not surrender careful and cautious exegesis of the NT data and claim more than what is legitimate. It appears that due to a reawakening of Christian theologians to the seriousness of the NT concentration on cosmic powers, many modern exegetes are interpreting *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* in Gal 4:3, 9 in light of what other NT passages say about "the world-rulers of this darkness" and "the spiritual forces of darkness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12).

In this paper the various interpretations of *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* have been surveyed, using the categories of principial, cosmological, and personal-cosmological. The cosmological view does not fit the context of Galatians 3–4. The personalized-cosmological view, while very attractive in view of the emphasis on demonic powers in Paul's writings, falters on the grounds of insufficient philological evidence. The interpretation most

[34] Heb 7:18 notes the *asthenēs* ("weakness") of the OT law, and in Rom 8:3 Paul states that the law was weak (*ēsthenei*).

[35] *SJT* 4 (1951) 292.

[36] Schlier, *Principalities* 9.

[37] Caird, *Principalities* x.

consistent with the evidence and that is enunciated in slightly various ways by Lightfoot, Meyer, Black, Burton, Mickelson and Delling (among others) is the principial view: the elementary or rudimentary religious teachings, possessed by the whole human race, to which both Jew and Gentile were enslaved prior to experiencing freedom by faith in Christ.