

What are the “Elements of the World” Paul Refers to in Galatians 4:3, 9 and Colossians 2:8, 20?

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I have heard that the Torah actually composes the “elemental things of the world,” referenced in [Galatians 4:3](#), [9](#) and [Colossians 2:8](#), [20](#). Is there any truth to this claim?

The specific clause *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου)—“the elemental things/spirits of the world”—appears in full in [Galatians 4:3](#) and [Colossians 2:8](#), followed by the shorter *stoicheia* in [Galatians 4:9](#), and *tōn stoicheiōn* (τῶν στοιχείων) in [Colossians 2:20](#). There is no single interpretation as to what this encompasses, agreed upon by all interpreters, as such “principles” could involve: (1) the ABCs of one’s religious observance, (2) what many of the ancients believed were the basic elements of the universe (i.e., earth, water, air, fire), or (3) cosmic spiritual powers like angels or demons. With these three major options alone to be considered, it should not be surprising as to why there is no full consensus as to what *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* means when read within the Pauline letters.

The second usage of “elemental principles of the world” in [Colossians 2:8](#), [20](#) is much easier to consider, as more information is given to us within the wider text of Paul’s writing. A fair number of Colossians interpreters are agreed that the issue confronted by Paul to his audience relates to a proto-Gnostic, mysticized Judaism, involving appeals (or even worship of!) made to angels ([Colossians 2:18](#)) and/or various spirit powers rather than Yeshua the Messiah.^[1] The local Judaism infecting the Believers at Colossae, which in turn had been infected by the local mishmash of Hellenistic, foreign, and mystical religious and philosophical beliefs in Phrygia, was leading many of the Believers astray. Some have concluded that the errors present among the Colossian Believers may be appropriated as a warning for people today errantly influenced by horoscopes or fortune-telling, yet in the Colossians’ case there may be more of a connection to mystery religions and cults.

While it is not at all difficult to see what *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* can mean in regard to [Colossians 2:9](#), [20](#)—as there are concrete examples of religious asceticism stated in the text ([Colossians 2:18](#), [20-23](#))—what *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* might mean in regard to [Galatians 4:3](#), [9](#) is much more complicated.

Being subject to *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* is a problem that can be Jewish (cf. [Galatians 4:3](#)), while at the same time it is more easily discernible as pagan. Paul writes the non-Jewish Galatians, “now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?” ([Galatians 4:9](#)). Various Galatians interpreters conclude that here Paul has just associated God’s commandments and paganism as basically being the same thing.^[2] The foolish Galatians, being led astray by the Influencers/Judaizers, are returning to a style of life that they should have left behind in paganism, following rules and regulations that are nothing more than

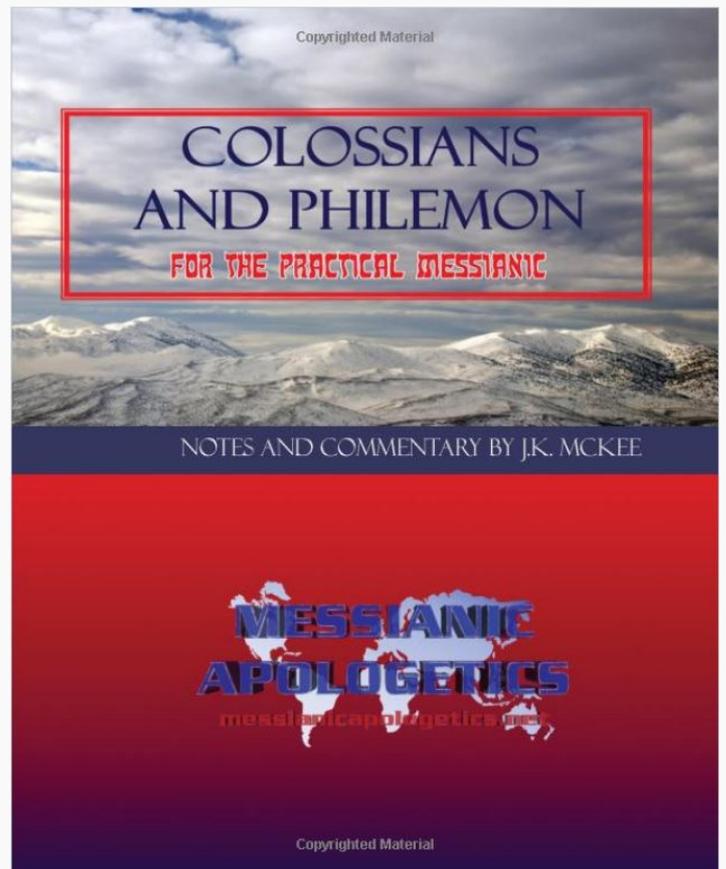
worldly principles. While it is likely that Paul used *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* in Colossians to refute errant, Gnostic/mystical practices, the first usage of *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* is said to be employed in a much different way.

Is God's Torah nothing more than "elementary principles of the world" to Paul? While it is not difficult to see how human beings approaching God's Torah can turn it into just fleshly rudiments via their own observance (i.e., like the sectarian "works of law" witnessed in 4QMMT), **this is surely not the Torah's fault!** Paul is the same one who would communicate "we know that the Law is spiritual" ([Romans 7:14](#) ) and "We know that the law is good if one uses it properly" ([1 Timothy 1:8, NIV](#) ). In fact, he says "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" ([Romans 8:7, NIV](#) 

Is it at all possible that there is another explanation for what Paul means in [Galatians 4:3](#) , [9](#) ? While it may not be a popular one among today's Galatians expositors, there is indeed another way we can look at this. Paul asks the Galatians, "how can you turn back again...?" (RSV) or return (Grk. *epistrephō*, επιστρέφω) to the elementary principles of the world. **All should be agreed that the Galatians were going back to things they should have left behind in paganism.** But is Paul associating First Century Judaism and paganism as being quantitatively indifferent? Are God's commandments in the Torah no different than a pagan philosophy or superstition? Or, if some sects of First Century Judaism had been errantly affected by aspects of paganism (such as the Hellenistic concept of Fate; cf. Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.172)—could those errantly influencing the Galatians similarly be part of a sectarian Judaism that advocated rituals similar to those in paganism?

Consider how Paul previously has asked the Galatians "who has bewitched you...?" ([Galatians 3:1](#) ). While it is easy for people in today's West to consider such a question to only be a rhetorical device, the fact remains that in ancient times various religious sects really did use witchcraft to cast spells and hexes on people, and parts of Judaism were not immune to this, either. Likewise, Paul says of the Influencers/Judaizers that they "do not even keep the Law themselves" ([Galatians 6:13](#) ). How could he say this if these people were just misguided legalists, only forcing ritual circumcision and proselyte conversion onto the non-Jews in Galatia? Given how *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* is later used in Colossians to depict errant, syncretistic Jewish practices—is it so impossible that the Influencers in Galatia could have also brought in errant, syncretistic practices? These could be things able to "bewitch" them.

The idea that the Influencers/Judaizers in Galatia could have advocated some kind of proto-Gnostic or mystical Jewish errors is not one often seen in contemporary Galatians interpretation, but it cannot be totally taken off the table. In worrying about the Galatians observing "days and months and seasons and years" ([Galatians 4:10](#) ), is Paul really up in arms about the Galatians remembering things like the Passover—which he actually instructed the Corinthians to observe ([1 Corinthians 5:7-8](#) )? Or would he be more concerned about the rituals and customs associated with the appointed times, brought in and practiced by the Influencers/Judaizers, which were affecting the Galatians? Samuel J. Mikolaski's comments are well taken:



For a more in-depth commentary on Colossians 2, see J.K. McKee's [Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic](#).

“Are these Jewish or pagan observances? In writing to the Galatians, Paul clearly has Judaizers in mind. Did these worship elemental spirits? Astrological elements were at times infused into Jewish as well as pagan practices.”^[3]

An alternative to be considered to Paul associating God’s commandments with paganism—and that the Galatians should not be following God’s Torah—is that in being affected by the Influencers, **the Galatians were following errant religious rituals that saturated the Influencers’ style of Torah observance.** The problem would not be the Galatians remembering the Sabbath (especially since Paul met many of them at *Shabbat* services, per his visit to Galatia in [Acts 13:13-14:28](#) ^[L]) or the appointed times, but rather *how the Influencers observed them*, infused with ungodly pagan rituals that the Galatians should have easily recognized as originating from “those who by nature are not gods” ([Galatians 4:8, NIV](#) ^[L]).

If this is to be considered, then it does not seem difficult as to why Paul would say that the Influencers/Judaizers break the very Torah they claim to uphold ([Galatians 6:13](#) ^[L]). They have already merited the Torah’s curse upon them for failing to be a blessing to others per God’s promise to Abraham ([Galatians 3:8](#) ^[L], [10](#) ^[L]), but they deserve it further by encouraging the Galatians to follow ungodly rituals *actually opposed by the Torah* (i.e., [Deuteronomy 18:10-14](#) ^[L]) that negatively affected their sectarian branch of Judaism, and considered by Paul to be classified among the works of the flesh ([Galatians 5:19-21](#) ^[L]).

Realizing that there are First Century Judaisms, *plural*, that are depicted within the Apostolic Scriptures is a difficult step for many readers to make, as many prefer to over-simplify the circumstances within the New Testament. Some branches of Ancient Judaism were affected by paganism. Not only are we supposed to realize this, but we are also required to make closer observations in reading the text, and ask ourselves some critical questions like whether Paul does associate God’s commandments and paganism as being the same thing. *Messianics today do not believe that the good rabbi from Tarsus associates God’s commandments as being synonymous with paganism.* Yet, some Messianics today do not heed the warning given by Paul against *ta stoicheia tou kosmou*, sometimes failing to realize that they may have been affected by various Jewish errors, which in turn have been affected by paganism. Fortunately, though, this does not concern a considerable majority of traditions employed today by the Synagogue, or even by Messianic Judaism, in its remembrance of the appointed times (cf. [Philippians 4:8](#) ^[L]).^[4]

References

[1] Cf. F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp 97-98; Peter T. O’Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon*, Vol. 44 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 110; Douglas J. Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp 187-193.

[2] Cf. Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*, Vol. 41 (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990), pp 180-181; Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp 298-299.

[3] Samuel J. Mikolaski, “Galatians,” in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds. *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1100.

[4] For a further evaluation of the options available, consult D.G. Reid, “Elements/Elemental Spirits of the World,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 229-233.

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