



Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Chapter 4, Verses 1-7 (addendum)

by Tim Kelley

I recently heard a teacher talk about the book of Galatians, and in his message he said that there are 5 rules a person must follow in order to teach his view on any biblical passage. Two of those were that 1) you must never spend over 60 seconds explaining any verse, and 2) the definitions of words must remain the same throughout the passage. Pretty strict rules! He went on to say that the above Rule #1 applies simply because most people's attention span is about one minute long, so if they're not really interested, you only have that one minute to make your point. The second rule is obvious – you can't change the definitions without a clear reason why you did . . . and then you must be able to show your reasons.

In Galatians chapter 4, Paul used the Greek word "stoicheion" (Strong's 4747) twice, once in verse 3, and again in verse 9. In both of these passages, the translators render "stoicheion" as "elements". Here's the verses "

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:3** Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world . . .

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:9** But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how *is it that* you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?

In verse 3, the "elements" were something that had kept the "children" under bondage, and then in verse 9, the "elements" were a "weak and beggarly" something that the people were returning back to. Most people believe that when Paul used the word "stoicheion", he is referring to the "nomos" (Strong's 3551) which we know to mean "law", or more specifically, the Torah.

The Biblical antinomians (those who claim the Torah has been done away) love these passages because in their mind Paul is painting the Torah as a bad thing, something that brings bondage; and since he used the same word just a few verses later - and because word definitions cannot change - Paul must therefore be saying that the Torah is "weak and beggarly".

On the other hand, Biblical pronomians (those who say the Torah is still in effect) hate these verses because they know that the Torah is good (Romans 7:12), that Yeshua is the focus of the law (Romans 10:4), and that He was born to protect the law (Gal. 4:4). How then (in their mind) could Paul claim that the Torah brought bondage or was some "weak and beggarly element". In order to make this all work in their mind, they change the definition of "nomos" in this passage from "Torah" to "oral law" in an attempt to make the rest of chapter 4 fit their view.

In the previous study, I (a pronomian) determined that Paul did indeed have the Torah in mind when he used the word "stoicheion" or "elements" and gave a number of reasons why I believe that to be so. So how am I going to handle verse 9? Haven't I painted myself into a corner? Is the Torah "weak and beggarly"? No it's not . . . and I'll explain that in the upcoming teaching in this series; but what I want to do now is explain a few more things about this Greek word "stoicheion".

Let's review what was said in the earlier teaching concerning the word "stoicheion".

"The word "elements" is translated from the Greek word "stoicheion" (Strong's 4747) which comes from a verbal root that means "to proceed in a row as the march of a soldier".¹ In the noun form it means "any first thing from which others belonging to some series or composite whole take their rise."² In other words, "stoicheion" are the building blocks from which something is derived. For example, our alphabet has letters that depict certain sounds, the first of which is "A", followed by "B", "C", "D", and so on in order. When we combine those letters, we make words that contain certain thoughts. When we want to speak those thoughts, we make sounds with our mouths that depict the sounds of those same letters.

Our English word "elements" can refer to the fundamental particles that make up all matter - the things we see, breath, and touch. For instance, water is made from the two elements hydrogen and oxygen. Thus, the elements are the "stoicheion" – the building blocks of all matter."

Being that it's a noun, *stoicheion* derives much of its meaning from the adjectives and the context that surrounds it. A good example of that is the Greek word "doulos" (Strong's 1401) which means "servant" or "slave". In the scripture, being a *servant* can be either good or bad depending on the context. For example –

^{NKJ} **John 8:34** Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave (*doulos*) of sin.

^{NKJ} **Matthew 25:23** "His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant (*doulos*); you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

^{NKJ} **Matthew 24:48** "But if that evil servant (*doulos*) says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,'

^{NKJ} **Acts 16:17** This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants (*doulos*) of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation."

In each of these passages, we glean the understanding of *servant* by the context. We must do the same for *stoicheion*.

"Stoicheion" is used seven times in the NT, most often by Paul (Galatians 4:3,9; Colossians 2:8,20) but also by also by Peter (2 Peter 3:10,12) and by the writer of Hebrews (Hebrews 5:12). In most cases, it appears that the term is used to indicate something that is ungodly or against God, but in Galatians 4:3, it was determined that the *stoicheion* was a good thing because it held the Jewish people together. In the book of Hebrews, *stoicheion* is also cast in a positive light –

^{NKJ} **Hebrews 5:12** For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles (*stoicheion*) of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

In the above passage it's quite obvious that the writer considers the *stoicheion* to be something of value. What's more, he precedes *stoicheion* with the word "arche" (Strong's 746) which means first, or more properly "arch". In English an "arch-" anything is first and primary. For instance "archbishop" is a leading bishop; an "archrival" is your primary opponent. We also understand an arch to be a very strong structure that holds up everything above it.

In the Hebrews passage, the "stoicheion arche" is the foundations of the faith, which to the Hebrews is the Torah. In fact, the "oracles" in this passage can be nothing other than the words spoken by YHVH to

¹ "stoicheo" – Strong's 4748

² Strong's definition as per Bible Works CD, ver. 6; Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the NT; Joseph Thayer; Baker Book House, 1977; pg. 588b

Moses. The writer is simply stating that his audience – Hebrews who should be quite knowledgably of the Torah - must first be taught the Torah before they can perform their God-given role, which is to be teachers of the Torah (Lev. 10:10; Deut. 4:9-10)

“Stoicheo”, the root word from which we get the Greek word “stoicheion”, is used a total of 5 times in the NT. They are³ :

- Acts 21:24 - . . . you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.
- Romans 4:12 - . . . but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham . . .
- Galatians 5:25 - If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.
- Galatians 6:16 - And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them . . .
- Philippians 3:16 - Nevertheless, to *the degree* that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.

In each of these cases the action being described would be considered good and proper for a believer in the God of Israel.

So the word “stoicheion” is simply a word that means “the first in an order”. It is indeed, the “building blocks”, the foundations on which something is built. To understand it's meaning in any given passage, we must understand the context associated with it. In regards to spiritual matters, a person's building blocks can be God's way, or the way of idolatry. For the Galatians, there was a mixture of both – the Jewish Galatians who had built their spiritual foundation on the Torah and the belief in the God of Israel, and the non-Jewish Galatians who had built their spiritual foundation on idolatry – the pantheon of mythological Greek gods and their worship of the earth – wind, water, fire, etc..

Thus, based on the context, the English word “elements” used in the above passages does indeed change meanings, not because we want to make it fit, but because Paul is contrasting two completely different foundations.

Shalom Alecheim

³ All quotes from the NKJ