

Galatians: "Weak and Beggarly Elements"

Post by "Don" of October 8, 2023 at 11:22 PM

(I apologize for the length of this post! TLDR: I do NOT believe that the Galatians "weak and beggarly elements" refer to Epicurean atoms nor show the Galatians were Epicureans before converting)

There are two pertinent verses to examine when discussing the "weak and beggarly elements." DeWitt states that: "The inference is that the Galatians, before they became Christians, had been Epicureans and believers in the atomic theory. The word 'elements' is a synonym for 'atoms.'"

From my perspective, DeWitt goes way beyond any "inference" that can be gleaned from the verses in Galatians; however, keep reading from some possible wrinkles in my perspective.

The verses in question are Galatians 4:3 and 4:9:

- Galatians 4:3 So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces[a] of the world. (Footnote (a): Or under the basic principles) (New International Version)
- Galatians 4:3 So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental principles[a] of the world. (Footnote (a): Or spirits) (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)
- Galatians 4:3 οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς, ὅτε ἦμεν νήπιοι, ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου ἤμεθα δεδουλωμένοι· (Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) Greek New Testament)
- Galatians 4:9 But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces[d]? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? (Footnote (d): Or principles) (New International Version)
- Galatians 4:9 Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental principles?[e] How can you want to be enslaved to them again? (Footnote (e): Or spirits) (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)
- Galatians 4:9 νῦν δὲ γνόντες θεόν, μᾶλλον δὲ γνωσθέντες ὑπὸ θεοῦ, πῶς ἐπιστρέφετε πάλιν ἐπὶ τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα, οἷς πάλιν ἄνωθεν [e]δουλεύειν θέλετε; (SBL Greek New Testament)

The words in question in the Greek are:

4:3 τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (ta stoikheia tou kosmou)

4:9 τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα (ta asthene kai ptokha stoikheia)

- τοῦ κόσμου < κόσμος kosmos i.e, cosmos: the world, the world system, our corner of the universe

- τὰ στοιχεῖα < στοιχεῖον "elements". This is the most important word in this argument, and it is the same word in both Galatians 4:3 and 4:9.

- ἀσθενῆ < ἀσθενής "weak"

- πτωχὰ < πτωχός "beggarly"

I first want to examine a selection of where Epicurus (or Diogenes Laertius) used στοιχεῖα or a close variation (Hicks translation available at Perseus Digital Library):

1. Epicurus, Letter to Menoikeus, 123: Ἄ δέ σοι συνεχῶς παρήγγελλον, ταῦτα καὶ πράττε καὶ μελέτα, ****στοιχεῖα**** τοῦ καλῶς ζῆν ταῦτ' εἶναι διαλαμβάνων.

"And I was continuously exhorting you to practice, to study, and to meditate on those things which I state distinctly to be ****the essential elements**** of a noble, beautiful, and virtuous life."

2. Diogenes Laertius 10.30: καὶ ἔστιν ἐν ταῖς Περὶ φύσεως βίβλοις ἑπτὰ καὶ τριάκοντα καὶ ταῖς ἐπιστολαῖς ****κατὰ στοιχεῖον****:

"[Epicurus's entire theory of Nature] is contained in the thirty-seven books Of Nature and, ****in a summary form****, in the letters."

3. Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus, 36: ἐπεὶ καὶ τῷ τετελεσιουργημένῳ τοῦτο κυριώτατον τοῦ παντὸς ἀκριβώματος γίνεται, τὸ ταῖς ἐπιβολαῖς ὀξέως δύνασθαι χρῆσθαι, ἐκάστων πρὸς ἀπλᾶ ****στοιχειώματα**** καὶ φωνὰς συναγομένων.

"For it is impossible to gather up the results of continuous diligent study of the entirety of things, unless we can embrace in short formulas and hold in mind all that might have been accurately expressed even to ****the minutest detail.****"

3. Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus, 37: Ὅθεν δὴ πᾶσι χρησίμης οὔσης τοῖς ὠκειωμένοις φυσιολογίᾳ τῆς τοιαύτης ὁδοῦ, παρεγγυῶν τὸ συνεχὲς ἐνέργημα ἐν φυσιολογίᾳ καὶ τοιούτῳ μάλιστα ἐγγαληνίζων τῷ βίῳ ἐποίησά σοι καὶ τοιαύτην τινὰ ἐπιτομὴν καὶ ****στοιχειώσιν**** τῶν ὄλων δοξῶν.

"Hence, since such a course is of service to all who take up natural science, I, who devote to the subject my continuous energy and reap the calm enjoyment of a life like this, have prepared for you just such an epitome and ****manual**** of the doctrines as a whole."

4. Scholia to the Letter to Herodotus, 44: ἐν ταῖς Δώδεκα ****στοιχειώσεσίν****

"In the twelve ****rudiments****" (for ease, let's call this "the twelve fundamentals")

5. Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus, 47: χρήσιμον δὴ καὶ τοῦτο κατασχεῖν τὸ ****στοιχεῖον.****

"This is ****an elementary fact**** which in itself is well worth bearing in mind."

6. AND this one: Epicurus, Letter to Pythocles, 86: οἷον ὅτι τὸ πᾶν σώματα καὶ ἀναφής φύσις ἐστίν, ἢ ὅτι ****ἄτομα <τὰ> στοιχεῖα****, καὶ πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα ὅσα μοναχὴν ἔχει τοῖς φαινομένοις συμφωνίαν:

"for instance, that the whole of being consists of bodies and intangible nature, or that ****the ultimate elements of things**** are indivisible (atoma), or any other proposition which admits only one explanation of the phenomena to be possible."

To summarize, the meanings of the word when used in those texts of Epicurus and Diogenes Laertius are:

- ****the essential elements**** (of a noble life)
- ****in a summary form****
- ****the minutest detail****
- ****manual**** (of the doctrines as a whole)
- ****rudiments**** (i.e., fundamentals)
- ****an elementary fact****
- ****the ultimate elements of things**** (are indivisible (atoma))

While this is a selection, and there are other variations within Diogenes Laertius's chapter on Epicurus, there is only one instance where Epicurus uses the word στοιχεῖα to refer to the "fundamental elements" of the physical universe. And, even there, he is using it in its "fundamental principle" connotation. The overwhelming use of that word in Epicurus's writings appears to be in the meaning of detail, fundamental, basic, elementary principles of a topic. We'll examine the uses of the word in the New Testament below.

To give DeWitt the benefit of the doubt, here is the definition of στοιχεῖον from Liddell & Scott (1940) A Greek-English Lexicon:

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, στοιχεῖον](#)

In addition to the basic, elementary, fundamental principles of a topic (e.g., letters, elements of speech, elements of proof, lines, points, etc.), Liddell & Scott do include "in Physics, στοιχεῖα were the components into which matter is ultimately divisible, elements, reduced to four by Empedocles, who called them ῥιζώματα, the word στοιχεῖα being first used (acc. to Eudem. ap. Simp. in Ph. 7.13) by Plato."

There's also this definition from [Strong's Exhaustive Concordance to the Bible](#):

Here's Strong's outline of Biblical usage, which is important in the context of discussing Paul's use of the word in Galatians:

Entry G4747 στοιχεῖον

I. any first thing, from which the others belonging to some series or composite whole take their rise, an element, first principal

A. the letters of the alphabet as the elements of speech, not however the written characters, but the spoken sounds

B. the elements from which all things have come, the material causes of the universe

C. the heavenly bodies, either as parts of the heavens or (as others think) because in them the elements of man, life and destiny were supposed to reside

D. the elements, rudiments, primary and fundamental principles of any art, science, or discipline, i.e. of mathematics, Euclid's geometry

Blue Letter Bible has Strong's Concordance that states that the KJV translates στοιχεῖον in the following manner: element (4x), rudiment (2x), principle (1x).

Galatians 4:3 & 9, as well as:

2 Peter 3:10: the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the ****elements**** shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. (KJV)

2 Peter 3:12: the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the ****elements**** shall melt with fervent heat? (KJV)

Colossians 2:8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments G4747 of the world, and not after Christ.

Colossians 2:20 Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the ****rudiments**** of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances

Hebrews 5:12 ye have need that one teach you again which be the ****first principles**** of the oracles of God;

The "elements" melting with fervent heat sounds like the fundamental parts of the universe kind of? But remember this sense of στοιχεῖα usually referred to the four elements: air, earth, fire, water; and not the atoms of Epicurus. In almost all cases, Epicurus uses ἄτομοι "atoms" when he means atoms. As shown in his writing above, στοιχεῖον and its variants usually mean "fundamental principles" of a topic, etc.

I think the fact that we have a table of elements in physics and we think of elements like carbon, nitrogen, etc. can color one's interpretation of this word.

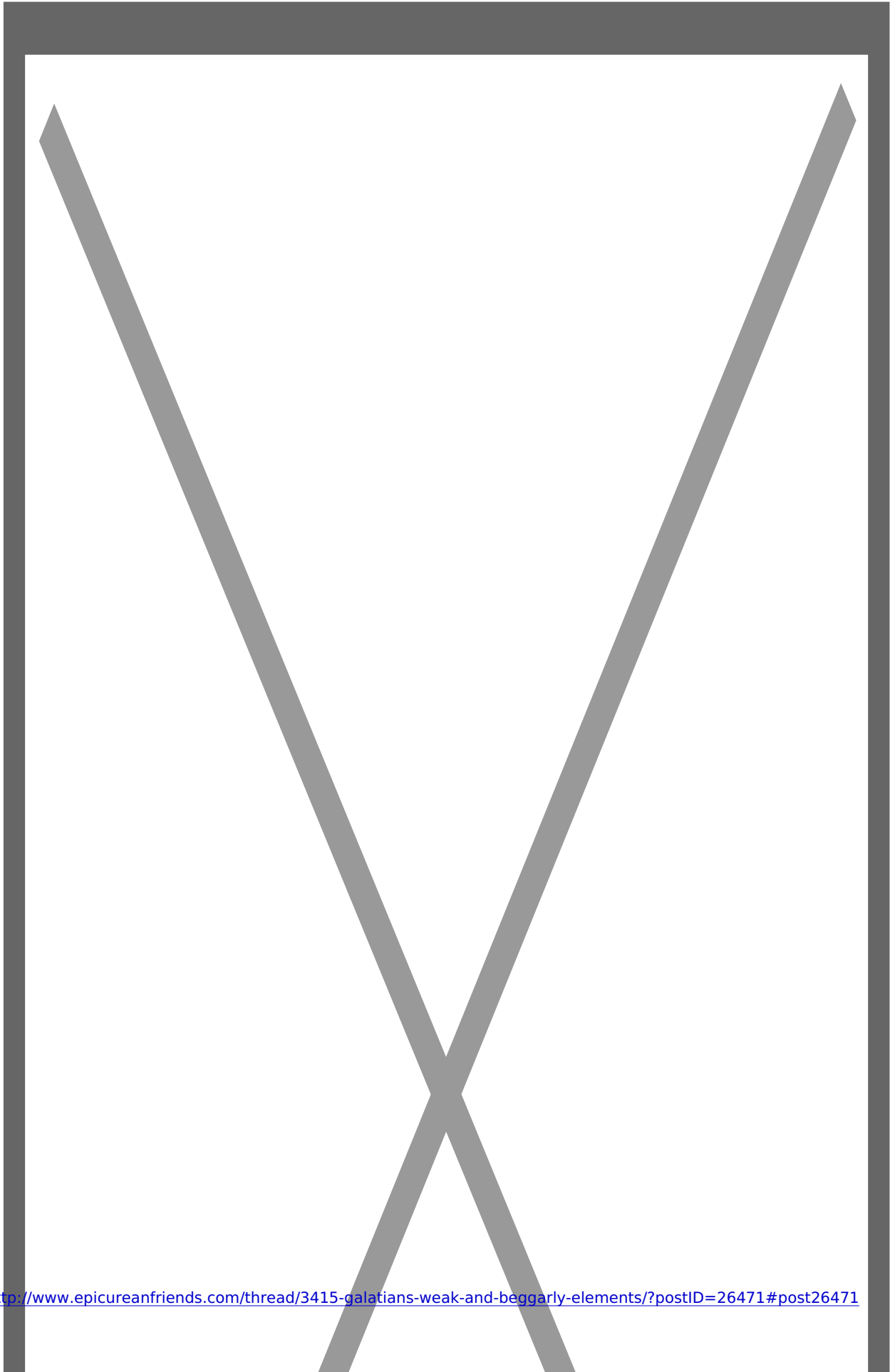
What do Biblical commentators say about Galatians ? This is also complicated by various competing Christian theologies, but let's take a look:

Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers: Weak and beggarly elements.—"Elements" is used here, in the same sense as in Galatians 4:3, of that elementary religious knowledge afforded in

different degrees to Jew and Gentile before the coming of Christ. These are called “weak” because they were insufficient to enable man to work out his own salvation. (Comp. St. Paul’s account of the inward struggle, and of the helpless condition to which man is reduced by it, in Romans 7:7-24.) They are called “beggarly,” or “poor,” because, unlike the gospel, they were accompanied by no outpouring of spiritual gifts and graces. The legal system was barren and dry; the gospel dispensation was rich with all the abundance and profusion of the Messianic time (Joel 2:19; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13-14; Isaiah 4:1; Isaiah 65:21-25; John 7:37-38, et al.) (Source: <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/galatians/4-9.htm>)

See also the commentary on Galatians 4:3 which has an extensive section on the meaning of στοιχεῖα

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[Galatians 4:3 - Sons and Heirs](#)

So also, when we were children, we were enslaved under the basic principles of the world.
biblehub.com

For example: "The Greek word στοιχεῖα calls for a few remarks, founded upon the illustration of its use given by Schneider in his 'Greek Lexicon.'...it recites the rudimental instruction of children, as if the apostle had said "under the A, B, C, of the world." This is evidently intended to describe the ceremonial Law; for in ver. 5 the phrase, "those under the Law," recites the same persons as are here described as "under the rudiments of the world;" as again the "weak and beggarly rudiments," in ver. 9, are surely the same sort of "rudiments" as are illustrated in ver. 10 by the words, "Ye observe days, and months, and seasons, and years." Since the Law under which the people of God were placed was God's own ordinance, we must infer that, when it is here designated as "the A, B, C, of the world,"

In summary, I think the sense of the Galatians backsliding and being enslaved to the legalistic ceremonial Law makes more sense in the context in which Paul is writing than trying to make the Galatians lapsing back into Epicureanism. DeWitt's chapter on Galatians provides no hard data on Galatians previously being Epicureans, but rather "If this..and if this... and if this... and if this..." It's all conjecture, and not convincing conjecture. I liken Dewitt's reasoning in this chapter to buying a new red Subaru and then seeing nothing but red Subaru's on the road! If he's looking for Epicurean hints, he's going to see Epicurean hints everywhere. And where he doesn't see them, he invents a way that they could be there... with the barest of actual evidence.

Sorry. I'm going to have to say the Galatians "weak and beggarly elements" do NOT refer to Epicurean atoms nor show the Galatians were Epicureans before converting.