

Elements / Rudiments of the World

“THE ELEMENTS OF THE WORLD” Is a phrase used by Paul in his letters to the Gal. 4:3: “When we were children we were in bondage under *the elements of the world*: but when the *fulness of time* was come, God sent forth His Son, &c.” Here the word is manifestly used to signify “*the things*” which make up the *kosmos* or commonwealth of Israel. “Children in bondage under the elements of the world” signifies the nation of Israel under the law of Moses. This constituted the *kosmos*, or world, or state which had its beginning at Sinai, and its *end* in the year 70. Under these elementary ordinances, statutes, &c., Israel, as children who had not attained to manhood, were in servitude until the fulness of time arrived, that Messiah, the Prince, should be manifested to Israel. The law of liberty was then proclaimed, and they were invited to a release from bondage to the law of sin and death. Many availed themselves of the proclamation, and for a while rejoiced in the liberty wherewith the Gospel had made them free. But, like “the sow that was washed and returned to her wallowing in the mire,” so they turned again to the observance of “days, months, and times, and years.” These were some of the elements of the world, and the apostle styles them “weak and beggarly *elements*, whereunto they desired again to be in bondage.”—(5:9.)

In his letters to the Colossians 2:8, Paul warns the disciples against Gentilism and Judaism; against the former, or “*philosophy*,” and against the latter, or “*vain deceit*.” This vain deceit was made up of the tradition of false teachers concerning circumcision and the law. They taught the disciples that unless they were circumcised and kept the law of Moses, they could not be saved. Now, says Paul, “beware, lest any man,” or teacher, “spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the—*stoicheia*”—elements or “*rudiments of the world*, and not after Christ.”—(5:20.) “Wherefore, if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments,” or elements “of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to” its elements, such as “ordinances after the doctrines and commandments of man; which things indeed have a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body.”

These *stoicheia tou kosmou* (for such is the phrase in all the passages, whether rendered “elements,” or “rudiments of the world” in the common version) gave the apostles much trouble. They had to watch the Hebrew disciples very closely to see that they did not Judaize, and so mix up with the gospel crotchets or traditions about meats, drinks, holy days, new moons, Sabbaths, voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, defilement by the touch, and so forth. But with all their vigilance, multitudes turned back to the “weak and beggarly elements of the world.” It became, therefore, necessary, especially as the apostles were withdrawing from the arena of debate, to remove this stumbling block out of the way. Accordingly, in the year 70, the day of judgment and of vengeance was revealed, and the *kosmos* of Israel was overthrown with fire and sword.

With this understanding of the matter, the paraphrase of the text is plainly this. “The day of the Lord, as he said, shall come upon this people Israel as a thief in the night, in which the government shall be subverted by the tumult of war; and the country and the cities, towns, villages, country seats, castles, synagogues, farms, and the sanctuary itself, shall all be desolated by fire. Seeing, then, that all these elements of our world or state shall be dissolved, what manner of persons, fellow citizens and brethren, ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking out and watching for the signs which the Lord Jesus delivered to us on the Mount of Olives, earnestly desiring the day of God as the epoch of your deliverance from the “fiery trial which is to try you?” Yea, “lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh;” for in that day of vengeance upon your adversaries, the old constitution from which they derive their power to

persecute you, will be “cast down to the ground” and trampled under foot by the Little Horn; and the elements of which the state is composed will be dissipated into pillars of smoke!

Nevertheless, brethren of the stock of Abraham, grieve not for your country. God, by His holy prophets, has promised us THE RESTORATION OF THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL, when our Lord Jesus shall sit upon the throne of his father David; and, when under the new constitution, which, by our service, he has made with the houses of Israel and Judah, we shall sit on thrones judging Israel, united into one nation, in rectitude and peace. Console yourselves, then, in the prospect of these things, as the “new heavens and new earth” which God hath promised, “wherein dwelleth righteousness for ever more.”—(Isa. 65:17.)

(The above was written in 1846, but laid aside and forgotten till recently. Fourteen years have not changed our views of the subject. The reader will judge for himself if they be correct, and dispose of them as he may deem fit.)

JOHN THOMAS.

March, 1861.¹

¹ (2001). *The Christadelphian*, 10(electronic ed.), 250–252.