

WEAKNESS LANGUAGE IN GALATIANS

DAVID ALAN BLACK

The Apostle Paul can rightly be regarded as "the Theologian of Weakness." Yet Paul's theology of weakness developed in a dynamic fashion in response to the situations facing him, and his particular formulations are consistently adapted and designed to meet particular issues at hand. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in those letters in which the apostle finds himself forced to answer the criticisms of his opponents regarding his own weakness (Galatians and 1 and 2 Corinthians). After an examination of Gal 4:9 and 13, the author concludes that weakness language is Paul's way of making clear to his readers in Galatia that the source of power for salvation and progress in holiness is found, not in one's religious activities (4:9) nor in one's own personal strengths (4:13), but in God himself.

* * *

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

THE most unified and highly developed concept of "weakness" in the NT is to be found in the writings of the Apostle Paul.¹ It is therefore all the more surprising that the Pauline weakness terminology has received virtually no comprehensive study outside of Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians.² In this article our purpose is not

¹The root ἀσθεν appears in the NT 83 times and in the Pauline Epistles 44 times, or 53% of the total (Robert Morgenthaler, *Statistik des neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes* [Zürich: Gotthelf, 1958] 79). The motif is most extensively developed in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians, where the words appear 38 times, or 86% of the total in Paul. The single largest complex of the termini is in 2 Corinthians 10-13, where the words appear a total of 14 times; the second largest is in 1 Corinthians (15 times), and the third largest is in Roman (8 times). In other instances (1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Timothy) the words occur only once or twice.

²The interpretation of the Pauline use of ἀσθένεια and its cognates has centered for the most part on "problem" passages such as 1 Corinthians 8, 2 Corinthians 10-13 and Romans 14. Among the more important studies of the meaning of ἀσθένεια in specific contexts are those of Gerd Theissen, "Die Starken und Schwachen in Korinth,"

to discuss every occurrence of ἀσθένεια and its cognates, but to examine two of the earliest, and in some ways the most unique, occurrences of the word-group found in a fascinating passage in Galatians (4:1–20). We hope thereby to make a helpful contribution to one aspect of Pauline lexicography in particular and to Pauline theology in general.

EXEGESIS OF THE TEXTS

In the letter to the Galatians weakness language occurs only twice but in two closely related places. The neuter plural adjective is found in the formulistic phrase τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα (“the weak and beggarly elements”) in 4:9, while δι’ ἀσθενεῖαν τῆς σαρκός (“on account of a weakness of the flesh”), a reference to the occasion of Paul’s Galatian visit, appears in 4:13. Since both of these references are in highly polemical settings, it seems evident that each plays a vital role in Paul’s argument against the legalistic threat to the Galatian churches. But because the terms are employed in two different paragraphs with differing themes and perspectives, each occurrence must be studied individually if we are to understand the specific role the motif plays in the argument of the author in Galatians.

A. Galatians 4:9

The first occurrence of ἀσθενής is in the section which comprises 4:8–11, where Paul begins a lengthy appeal to the Galatians based on his previous assertion that all Christians are sons and heirs of God and therefore free from the law. Although it would be a mistake to try to force logical cohesion all through this section—Galatians being an emotional *apologia pro vita sua*—we can reconstruct with some accuracy the apostle’s train of thought in the broader context as follows: (a) in 4:1–7 he first illustrates the freedom of the Christian with an example from ordinary life concerning the legal status of a

EvT 35 (1975) 155–72; Max Rauer, *Die “Schwachen” in Korinth und Rom* (BibS[F]21; Freiburg: Herder, 1923); Walter Schmithals, *Der Römerbrief als historisches Problem* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1975) 95–107; and Erhardt Güttgemanns, *Der leidende Apostel und sein Herr* (FRLANT 90; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 142–70. The most thorough and comprehensive investigations of the words in their wider meaning are found in Ernst Käsemann, *Die Legitimität des Apostels: Eine Untersuchung zu 11 Korinther 10–13* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956) 37–43; Eric Fuchs, “La faiblesse, gloire de l’apostolat selon Paul (Etude sur 2 Co 10-13).” *ETR* 2 (1980) 231–53; and J. Cambier, “Le critère paulinien de l’apostolat en 2 Co 12, 6s.,” *Bib* 43 (1962) 481–518. Special notes have been devoted to the word-group in various NT commentaries, but on a limited scale, and nowhere are the weakness-termini in Galatians given a unified treatment.

child; (b) in 4:8–11 he shows that the special observance of certain portions of the Jewish sacred calendar is a return to the “elements” from which the Galatians had been saved; and (c) in 4:12–20 Paul makes a personal appeal to the Galatians, based on his former relationship with them, to accept him and his message.

The uniquely Pauline expression τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα in 4:9, which is to be understood in conjunction with the parallel expression in 4:3, τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, suggests a relationship of some sort between the first two of these paragraphs, i.e., between 4:1–7 and 4:8–11. This relationship is probably best understood in terms of Paul’s concept of the status of Christians prior to the coming of faith. In 4:1–11 his main concern is to contrast the former condition of his readers with their new state after being converted. Since Paul views the human condition apart from Christ as servitude to “the elements of the world” (4:3), he is surprised to hear that the Galatians are ready to sacrifice all the privileges of their new religion by going back to their former state of slavery under these elements (4:9). Formerly the Galatians, mostly pagans, had been under bondage to heathenism, but have since “come to know God” (4:9). Do they now wish to enslave themselves again, this time to Judaism and its ritual?

Paul argues against returning to the elements first of all with an illustration of guardianship (4:1–7). The condition of man under the law is inferior, writes the apostle, because man under law is like an heir who has been placed under a guardian and has no freedom of action. With this familiar custom the Galatians are to realize that, by returning to their former condition they would be losing, not gaining, and would again become νήπιοι, δούλοι, ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους (4:1, 2). Next, Paul stresses that if the Gentile Galatians adopt Jewish practices, they will be returning to slavery from the glorious liberty enjoyed by the sons of God in Christ Jesus (cf. 3:26). Therefore the apostle exhorts the Galatian Christians to leave behind religious ritualism lest they again become enslaved and forfeit their rights as heirs according to the promise (4:8–11).

In general, these verses are clear enough, but the passage is not without its problems. The main difficulty is the word στοιχεῖα itself, which in 4:9 the KJV represents by “elements” and the RSV by “elemental spirits.”³ What exactly were these “weak” στοιχεῖα to which the Galatians were in bondage (4:3) and under whose power they were in danger of returning (4:9)? A consultation of the lexicons reveals that the word is capable of an extraordinary range of meanings

³Cf. NEB, “spirits of the elements”; NASB, “elemental things”; NIV, “principles.”

and its usage in Paul is by no means settled.⁴ Of all the interpretations advanced in the exegesis of this verse,⁵ three possible meanings come into play.

First, στοιχεῖα may be taken as referring to the law of Israel exclusively. Though this view is consistent with Paul's teaching on the Mosaic institution—that it enslaves men (3:23)—it is difficult to see its application to the Gentiles⁶ who were never under the Mosaic system in their pre-Christian state. Nor does this view explain the additional phrase τοῦ κόσμου (4:3) which implies a non-divine origin of the στοιχεῖα, in contrast to the Jewish emphasis on the otherworldly character of the commandments.

Second, the reference to the former bondage to the "elements" may be a description of enslavement to personal spiritual beings under whose power the Gentile Galatians had been held prior to their conversion.⁷ The word στοιχεῖα may come to mean "angels" or

⁴See esp. BAGD 768–69. Στοιχεῖα is the neuter plural form of the adjective στοιχεῖος, which means "standing in a row," "an element in a series." By metonymy, however, the word came to refer to the ultimate parts of anything. It is used in classical Greek to refer to the letters of the alphabet, from which came the meaning "rudiments," the "ABCs" of any subject. It can also refer to the component parts of physical bodies; in particular it was the Stoic term for the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. In Christian writers from the middle of the second century A.D. the term is used in an astronomical sense to mean the heavenly bodies. In Hellenism the word came to include not only the physical elements but the spirits believed to be behind them, the "cosmic beings." These personified στοιχεῖα came to be understood as the lords of the world, the final and most important principles of life, and as such were considered worthy of man's worship.

The precise meaning of στοιχεῖα in Paul is still a matter of debate, and the question must be left open until more evidence comes to light. For a detailed survey of the interpretations of the term in the pre-Christian, Christian, patristic and modern eras, see C. J. Kurapati, *Spiritual Bondage and Christian Freedom according to Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of the Epistle to the Galatians* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1976); cf. A. J. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World. An Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul's Teaching* (Kampen: Kok, 1964) 5–30; G. Delling, "στοιχέω, κτλ.," *TWNT* 7 (1964) 670–82. On the meaning of στοιχεῖα in Paul see esp. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements*, 57–68; Delling, "στοιχέω, κτλ.," 683–86; F. Mussner, *Der Galaterbrief* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 293–303; E. Burton, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1950) 510–18.

⁵In the commentaries the term is usually discussed under 4:3. However, by common consent the meaning of στοιχεῖα is identical in both Gal 4:3 and 9, even though in the latter verse the expression τοῦ κόσμου is absent.

⁶The context indicates that Paul wrote this section with the *Gentile* Galatians especially in mind: (a) they were obviously idol worshippers (4:8), and (b) they had become Christians directly and not through Judaism as proselytes (3:1–6); cf. Burton, *Galatians*, 215.

⁷So J. M. Boice (*Galatians*, in Vol. 10 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary [Romans-Galatians]* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1976] 472) and many other commentators. The law and the στοιχεῖα are so intimately related that some scholars see

"spirits," and if this is Paul's meaning here, he will be referring to demonic bondage which is the ultimate contrast to freedom in Christ. The advantage of this view is that it agrees with the reference to the false gods (or demons) in 4:8 which the Galatians, as pagans, no doubt formerly worshipped. The disadvantage is that it is hard to see how Paul could include himself,⁸ a Pharisee, among those who had been in bondage to weak and beggarly astral spirits who control the universe. Furthermore, this interpretation relies on literature somewhat late for the period in which Paul wrote his letters.⁹

Third, the word στοιχεῖα may be taken as referring to the elemental stages of religious experience which are common to all men. According to this view, the expression "the elements of the world" indicates 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.¹⁰ This meaning of στοιχεῖα, or one closely related to it, is possibly involved also in Col 2:8 and 20.

Support for this latter viewpoint is, in our opinion, stronger than for the two former interpretations. Paul seems to apply his remarks in this chapter equally to the Jewish and Gentile worlds. Only this view allows for that fact. It is evident also that at least in one respect the στοιχεῖα against which the apostle warns in Galatians involved Mosaic-Pharisaic ordinances. When Gal 4:10 is considered as an interpretation of 4:9, this verse indicates that the στοιχεῖα can in a general way be considered merely as rudimentary religious observances, void of any authentic intrinsic meaning or worth. Elementary teachings regarding regulations such as these were employed by both Jews and Gentiles alike in their attempt to achieve redemption and salvation.¹¹ Jewish religion considered law-observance, as well as the

both Judaism and paganism among the personal spirits; cf. Bo Reicke ("The Law and the World according to Paul," *JBL* 70 [1951] 259-76, esp. pp. 261-63) who identifies the "elements" with the good angels who ordained the law (cf. Gal. 3:19).

⁸Cf. 4:3: "So also when we were children, we were enslaved under τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου."

⁹Cf. Dellings, "στοιχέω, κτλ.," 682-83, and Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements*, 43-46 and 58. The meaning "spiritual power" for στοιχείον is not attested before the *Testamentum Salomonis* dated to the 4th century A.D.

¹⁰So, e.g., William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Galatians* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 157. Burton (*Galatians*, 518) defines στοιχεῖα as "the rudimentary religious teachings possessed by the race."

¹¹The observance of "days, months, seasons and years" (4:10) implies cultic activities known to both Judaism and paganism and which are probably to be regarded as typical religious behavior; so Hans Dieter Betz, *A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 217. For the view that these activities are sacred Jewish seasons only, cf. John Eadie, *A Commentary on*

keeping of the multitudinous rules added by religious leaders to those previously given at Sinai, as the way whereby salvation could be attained. The worshippers of pagan deities, on the other hand, sought to achieve salvation by their own rituals and in accordance with their own unregenerate nature, the σάρξ.¹² But both Jews and Gentiles in their pre-Christian state are in bondage to ordinances and regulations. Thus for the Gentile Christians, under the influence of the false teachers, to turn again¹³ to the στοιχεῖα is in Paul's mind simply an exchange of one form of bondage (to heathenism) for another (to Judaism).

In the question in 4:9 begun by πῶς—"How is it possible that you are returning again to the weak and beggarly στοιχεῖα?"—Paul expresses his utter shock to learn that men who had been delivered from the enslaving teachings of paganism now wish to become enslaved all over again, this time by Jewish regulations. That they could consider a return to such bondage is especially incomprehensible in view of the fact that they had actually come to know God in a personal, genuine way.¹⁴ Although the Galatians had not yet gone as far as the Judaizers had wanted them to go—they have not been circumcized (5:2)—Paul fears his labor in evangelizing them will eventually be wasted (4:11). Their course of action is to the missionary Paul as inexcusable as it is inexplicable, and his astonishment forces him to take up once again, though now with new intensity, his discussion of the deadly character of legalism.¹⁵

the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 315–17; Hendriksen, *Galatians*, 165–66.

¹²According to Bandstra (*The Law and the Elements*, 61–71), the two most important basic forces in the στοιχεῖα are the law and the flesh. Therefore the yielding of the Galatians to the observance of feast days is at the same time an act of submission to the flesh; the observance itself is but evidence of their enslavement to the σάρξ.

¹³Πάλιν does not mean "back" (*retro*) but "again" (*iterum*), though the notion of "going back" to the elements is clearly implied in the prepositional prefix of ἐπιστρέφειν.

¹⁴The participle is γνόντες (4:9), not εἰδότες (cf. 4:8). On this distinction see Donald W. Burdick, "Οἶδα and Γινώσκω in the Pauline Epistles," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, eds. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 344–56, esp. pp. 351–52.

¹⁵One must, however, distinguish between Paul's evaluation of the situation and what the Galatians' point of view was. In Paul's mind the Galatians were about to give up Christianity and return to paganism (i.e., "slavery"). The Galatians, on the other hand, desired only to switch from the Pauline form of Christianity to the Jewish form which required circumcision and law-obedience. They never imagined that the acceptance of the Torah meant a return to paganism, that being ὑπὸ νόμου was the same as being ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου; cf. Betz, *Galatians*, 217; Boice, *Galatians*, 476; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (NICNT; Grand

Accordingly, we believe that the most consistent answer to the problem of στοιχεῖα in 4:9 is found when the term is understood as referring to elemental stages of religion whereby both Jew and Gentile sought to gain salvation. According to the context, service under the στοιχεῖα must be wide enough to embrace both the service of the Jews under the law of Moses and that of the Gentiles under the false gods. If this interpretation is correct, Paul virtually identifies the religious celebrations of the Jews, who worship the true and living God, with those of the heathen, who worship τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὐσιν θεοῖς (4:8). This is in perfect agreement with Paul's earlier teaching that the purpose of the Mosaic law was not to deliver, but to hold Jews captive in preparation for the deliverance which was to come through the promised "seed" (3:19-22).

However, it should be noted that Paul's use of στοιχεῖα for the common enslavement of both Jew and Gentile does not involve an identification in every respect. The Jew still sought to worship the true God, while the Gentile δεισιδαιμονία involved objects of worship which "by their very nature" (φύσει) could not be considered "gods" in any sense (4:8). Still, both situations are equal in the single point that they both involve a bondage, in contrast to the glorious liberty and freedom enjoyed by the "sons of God" (3:26-4:7).¹⁶ In this sense, Jewish law is simply one particular manifestation of that which inevitably enslaves all men in a helpless condition which only faith in the promised Messiah can remedy (4:3-5). Thus, while there is not identity, there is such a similarity between the heathen *cultus* and the Mosaic ritual that both may be described by the same epithet, τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου.

This brings us to the problem of the specific meaning of ἀσθενῆ in 4:9. If our interpretation of the στοιχεῖα which bring enslavement is correct, then the addition of the adjectival modifiers ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχά will be Paul's way of emphasizing the total powerlessness of the law and its observance to gain the favor of God. This is an important facet of the apostle's overall argument in Galatians, fighting as he must against an overevaluation of the law by which obedience to its commandments becomes a way of salvation. To the preachers of Judaism, Paul's gospel was in this respect woefully deficient and

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 161. Therefore Paul is anxious to show the Galatians that the opponents are actually enemies of the gospel who seek to destroy the church (1:6-9). He who chooses to follow their way not only falls back into the servitude of the elements, but is obligated to do the impossible: keep the whole law (5:3).

¹⁶On the significance of the motif of sonship in Galatians, see the excellent monograph by Brendan Byrne, "Sons of God"—"Seed of Abraham" (AnBib 83; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1979) 141-90.

therefore merely κατὰ ἄνθρωπον (1:11), for it needed to be “corrected” by the observance of special days, months, seasons and years (4:10), and especially by the observance of the markedly Jewish rite of circumcision (5:2-3, 6, 11; 6:12). Incredibly, the Galatians were on the verge of adopting the entire cultic-ritualistic system of Judaism as a means of completing what had begun only “imperfectly” under the tutelage of Paul.

Since the Galatians do not regard their course as a dangerous one, Paul must try to convince them that their present drift toward legalism is in reality a return to slavery. Contrary to the claims of the Judaizers, the στοιχεῖα are ineffective for giving life, for they are ἀσθενῆ and lack the inherent power to accomplish salvation. The Mosaic law, as a member or component part (στοιχείον) of the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, requires what God demands, but is powerless to accomplish anything ultimately positive. The law provokes sin and transgression (Rom 5:20), condemns sin (Rom 4:15; Gal 3:10), and serves as a παιδαγωγός¹⁷ (Gal 3:23-25), but it also is the power of sin (1 Cor 15:56) and the occasion for sin (Rom 7:8, 11) and inevitably leads to death. Thus, in Paul’s mind the “weak” law is in one aspect definitely a *force* to be reckoned with as it operates in the sphere of the flesh and ultimately issues in sin and death. The opponents, and now the Galatians, understood the elements as life-bringing forces, but Paul knows that they are really “weak and beggarly,” completely ineffectual to do what the law-preachers have promised.

Because the law involves religious bondage, it is not surprising to find Paul’s warnings against it in this passage and indeed throughout the entire letter (cf. 1:9, 2:4-5, 15-21; 3:1-5; 5:1-4; 6:7-8, 12-13). Inherent in the Christian life is the potential danger of a man once again seeking to live according to the law and flesh. But this course of life brings men into bondage, “be it the bondage of the immature heir, the Jew, or that of the slave, the Gentile,”¹⁸ or, we might add, that of the misdirected Christian. Therefore, since any observance of Jewish ritual practices by Gentile converts amounts to nothing less than a return to bondage to the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, Paul must go

¹⁷The term παιδαγωγός stresses the positive, but purely preparatory aspect of the law’s function. Because the Judaizers attempted to extend that function *beyond* the time of Christ’s coming, Paul must stress its provisional status. If J. W. MacGorman is correct, the English rendering of παιδαγωγός should emphasize the *custodial* (i.e., “custodian,” “guardian”) rather than the *educative* (i.e., “schoolmaster,” “tutor”) function of the law in Gal 3:24-25. See his article, “The Law as Paidagogos: A Study in Pauline Analogy,” in *New Testament Studies, Essays in Honor of Ray Summers*, eds. Huber L. Drumright and Curtis Vaughan (Waco, Texas: Markham, 1975) 99-111, esp. p. 110.

¹⁸Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements*, 65.

to great lengths to convince the Galatians that these ritualistic celebrations are valid only for those who are still controlled by the old aeon. With regard to the salvation and sanctification of Christians, the elements are both ἀσθενῆ and πτωχά, and indeed are a stumbling block to the Christian life.

Paul's view that the law in its weakness works spiritual death finds its main parallel in his acknowledgment that in the death and resurrection of Christ the law and the στοιχεῖα have been conquered. This fact is not insignificant in our quest to understand Paul's weakness language in Galatians, nor is it without parallel in the apostle's other writings: "God did what the law, weakened as it was by the flesh [ἐν ᾧ ἡσθένει διὰ τῆς σαρκός], could not do; sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom 8:3). Paul rejects the works of the law because God has rejected in the person and work of Christ a life dedicated to nomistic service. The condition of man under law has now in Christ been superseded by a new set of conditions, namely, faith in Christ and his confession before men. God's people are therefore marked by faith, as indeed Abraham was (3:6-9), not by the works of the law.¹⁹ Thus Paul insists that legalism is a betrayal of the whole gospel (5:2-4), for righteousness before God is a result only of faith and is a free gift which cannot be merited by a man (5:5). *Nothing* therefore is able (σθένος) to earn salvation or sanctification—neither circumcision nor uncircumcision (5:6).

Having condemned such behavior, the apostle adds that life in Christ involves a different kind of bondage, which he defines explicitly in 5:13-14 as one's love of his neighbor. With six Greek words he reduces all of the statutes of the Jewish law into a single one: ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν; "you shall love your neighbor as [you love] yourself" (5:14). His purpose of course is to show that in the single commandment to love of Lev 19:18 are summarized all the requirements of the Christian faith.²⁰ Here Paul can speak favorably of the law, for when Christians love and serve others, the law is fulfilled. This fact, however, in no way weakens Paul's argument against law and in defense of a gospel of pure grace. The law as a system of rules and regulations has no place in the life of a Christian, for it cannot effectuate its own fulfillment, but the essential ends of the law can and will be met through those who live in and are led by the Spirit (5:16-18). This life in the Spirit (πνεύματι)

¹⁹Cf. in this connection Joseph B. Tyson, "'Works of Law' in Galatians," *JBL* 92 (1973) 430-31. See also Markus Barth's discussion of Paul's use of πίστις in Galatians, in "The Kerygma of Galatians," *Int* 21 (1967) 143-45.

²⁰Victor Paul Furnish (*The Love Command in the New Testament* [New York: Abingdon, 1972] 96-97) offers an excellent discussion of this subject.

is characterized neither by legalism nor by license, but by a life of faith and love which Paul discusses in concrete terms in the following verses (5:19–26).²¹

This being the case, there is a certain presumption in viewing the στοιχεῖα (and the law) not as something positively evil *per se*, but as elements which are ἀσθενῆ and ineffectual, and therefore open to the dangerous possibility of enslaving men who were redeemed by Christ and through him have begun a new existence in the Spirit. Or to use Paul's terms, while the στοιχεῖα are not inherently harmful, they are "weak," for they are incompetent to bring salvation and life, and "beggarly," for they have no wealth whereby they can provide an inheritance. Since they are operative in the κόσμος, within the sphere of human activity, and among a fallen mankind, they are unable to set men free as Christ has done by redeeming them through his death on a tree (3:13).

The accent in Gal 4:3 and 9 would therefore appear to lie on the modifying expressions τοῦ κόσμου and ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχά. The latter expression can be considered as a substitute for the former, for the words "weak and beggarly" in 4:9 describe what in essence is meant by the genitive "of the world" in 4:3.²² The noun κόσμος here does not mean "the universe" or "the material world," but "the world of mankind," the present eschatological age, and hence the στοιχεῖα are those elements which enslave the members of the old aeon to which the Galatians are tempted to return. The adjectives ἀσθενῆ and πτωχά are therefore only too appropriate to describe the impotence of the στοιχεῖα of the κόσμος to provide salvation for man and deliverance from his present bondage. The ascription ἀσθενῆ does not deny the harmful potential of the enslaving powers, but emphasizes their identity with the sphere of human activity which belongs to the old aeon and which is passing away, and signifies the total powerlessness of commandments with reference to spiritual deliverance. Thus the στοιχεῖα are ἀσθενῆ, "parce qu'ils ne peuvent pas opérer ce qu'ils prétendent, conduire les hommes au salut."²³ They are also πτωχά, a term which in classical Greek referred to basic economic deprivation but came to mean, metaphorically, deprivation of power and dignity.²⁴ Its meaning here is that the religious elements of the old age are not

²¹Cf. Wolfgang Schrage, *Die konkreten Einzelgebote in der paulinischen Paränese* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1961) 231–33.

²²So Reicke, "The Law and the World," 264–65; cf. Delling, "στοιχέω, κτλ.," 685: "Man kann fragen ob ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχά nicht den Genitiv τοῦ κόσμου interpretieren; jedenfalls ist mit beiden negativen Wendungen alle vorchristliche Religion zusammenfassend abgeurteilt."

²³M. J. Lagrange, *Saint Paul: Epître aux Galates* (EB; Paris: Lecoffre, 1950) 107.

²⁴Ernst Bammel, "πτωχός, κτλ.," *TWNT* 6 (1959) 885–915, esp. p. 909.

only powerless but also resourceless to supply what is needed to extricate man from his bondage to sin and the flesh, in contrast to "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Heb 7:8).

Therefore, while it is not necessary to restrict the meaning of ἀσθενῆ too rigidly,²⁵ in view of the emphasis in this section upon the inadequacy of the law, it would seem that the apostle is thinking especially of the impotence of legal enactments to secure salvation or progress in holiness, regardless of whatever beneficial side-effects such "fundamental religious elements" might have. These στοιχεῖα, common to both pagan and Jewish religion, not only cannot procure spiritual blessings, but ultimately bring men into bondage to their own impulse to be made perfect in the flesh (3:3) and are thus to be avoided by the Christian at all costs.

B. Galatians 4:13

The second occurrence of weakness-termini in Galatians is found at the beginning of the highly enigmatic paragraph (4:12–20) devoted to a discussion of the Galatians' former attachment to Paul and why they should now follow his earnest counsel to reject the gospel of the false teachers. Considerations of space preclude a disproportionate discussion of the critical problem concerning the chronology of Galatians raised by τὸ πρότερον in v 13. Within the scope of this study we must accept the possibility that the words can mean "on the former of two occasions," though in our view 4:13 does not demand two visits of Paul to Galatia (according to Koine usage τὸ πρότερον can just as easily be rendered "originally," or "previously").²⁶ Certainly the question of whether 4:13 does or does not support the south-Galatian hypothesis cannot be resolved here; regardless of one's position on that issue, however, these verses clearly refer to Paul's preaching on the occasion of the founding of the Galatic churches.

There are few NT phrases which can boast of such a variety of interpretations as δι' ἀσθένειαν τῆς σαρκός in Gal 4:13. Paul makes it clear that the Galatians know what his "weakness" actually is, but his readers today have not had their eyewitness advantage, and they are left to infer from the context the identity of Paul's ἀσθένεια. This means that in order to gain an accurate knowledge of the content of

²⁵E.g., Boice (*Galatians*, 473) offers the interesting suggestion that there is a subtle link between the ideas of redemption and adoption in 4:5 and the phrase "the weak and beggarly elements." H. Schlier (*Der Brief an die Galater* [KEK; 14th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971] 203) correctly emphasizes the powerlessness of the elements "gegenüber der Macht und dem Leben Gottes und seiner 'Söhne', und erweist sich ihre Verehrung als die angestrenzte und furchtsame Leistung an überwundene und verfallende Götter." Many other parallels and points of contrast could be noted.

²⁶See BAGD 722.

the term ἀσθένεια in 4:13, it is once again necessary to study the word in the context of Paul's wider argument in this portion of the letter.

At this juncture in Galatians 4 Paul has turned from formal argument to an appeal to the former bond of unity which existed between him and the Galatian churches. The intensely personal quality of this appeal is seen throughout, but especially in v 19 where the apostle compares himself to a mother enduring birth-pangs and the Galatians to a human embryo in the process of being formed. The metaphors need not be pressed too far; indeed, the whole image seems to break down because the formation of a child in the womb can hardly be said to *follow* labor pains. This is, however, no reason to regard this verse as a later interpolation:²⁷ Paul simply wants to emphasize by the use of word-pictures his great pastoral concern and love for his converts.

This intensely personal and highly enigmatic entreaty poses an interesting question of interpretation: Why does the apostle suddenly bring up, in the middle of his discussion of the Christian's freedom from the law, the subject of the particular circumstances of the founding of the Galatian churches, including his ἀσθένεια? The Galatians were already quite aware of the situation (cf. οἴδατε, 4:13). How can this intimate account be an argument against those who were wooing the Galatians into legalism?

The obscurity of this passage perhaps cannot be explained in a purely logical way; it is possible that Paul was so overwhelmed by emotion at this point in writing that he simply lost his train of thought. For this reason many scholars are of the opinion that Paul has ceased argumentation and has turned to emotional begging and appealing.²⁸ But psychological interpretations of the passage, while properly pointing to the intensity and passion of Paul's appeal, fail to recognize the rhetorical character of these verses.

²⁷Cf. J. C. O'Neill (*The Recovery of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* [London: S.P.C.K., 1972] 61–62) who ascribes the words μέχρις οὗ μορφωθῆ Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν to a glossator.

²⁸According to Lagrange (*Galates*, 110–11), Paul's appeal is "moins un raisonnement qu'un desir passionné d'union par une bonne volonté réciproque. Paul a fait les premiers pas: que les Galates en fassant autant!" The same idea is expressed by A. Oepke, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater* (ThHK 9; 2nd ed.; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1957) 140–41; Burton, *Galatians*, 235; Mussner, *Galaterbrief*, 304–5. Robertson writes: "It is just in writers of the greatest mental activity and vehemence of spirit that we meet most instances of anacoluthon. Hence a man with the passion of Paul naturally breaks away from formal rules in the structure of the sentence when he is greatly stirred, as in Gal. and 2 Cor." A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 435.

Betz²⁹ has demonstrated the remarkable similarity between this section and the standard Hellenistic literary topos of "friendship" (περὶ φιλίας), which calls for a change between heavy and light sections and an emotional appeal to offset mere abstract argumentation. Both the Galatians and Paul would have been acquainted with this theme, and if the similarity here is more than coincidental, Paul will be arguing that his relationship with the Galatians (his "true friendship") now, as then, requires the reciprocity of his converts. The force of the argument lies in the fact that when Paul needed help the most, the Galatians did not hesitate to provide without reservation the assistance required to restore him. And though they could have found cause to despise him, they had proven their friendship by accepting Paul as an ἄγγελον θεοῦ, ὡς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν (v 14). But they had not only received Paul with open hearts—they had also accepted the message of life which accompanied him to Galatia, thus creating between them a bond of Christian φιλία. It is this "friendship" that forms the basis of Paul's present appeal to the Galatians.

This means that the present passage in Galatians "is neither inconsistent nor lacking argumentative force,"³⁰ but serves to accentuate the paradox that these same ones who had once so enthusiastically received Paul now consider him as their enemy and reject his gospel. The appeal of this section, then, is an argument for the reestablishment of a good personal relationship which each party had once enjoyed but which the Galatians' present inclination to live by the law has soured.

Paul opens his appeal with the puzzling words γίνεσθε ὡς ἐγώ, ὅτι καὶ γὰρ ὡς ὑμεῖς, "become as I, for I also as you" (4:12). The expression is capable of a wide variety of interpretations. In view of the preceding reference to law and the elements (4:1-11), the probable meaning is that Paul is asking the Galatians to enter into the freedom from law which he now enjoys, while at the same time reminding them of his former identification with the Gentile Galatians in order to win them for Christ (cf. 1 Cor 9:20-22). If this interpretation is right, we can paraphrase the expression as follows: "Become as I am, for I also became as you were."³¹ In other words, in seeking to win them to Christ, the end of which was to make them like himself—free from the στοιχεῖα—Paul had made himself like the Galatians by disclaiming any special privilege as a Jew and by renouncing the

²⁹Galatians, 220-23.

³⁰Ibid., 221.

³¹Greek reconstruction: γίνεσθε ὡς ἐγώ εἰμι, ὅτι καὶ γὰρ ἐγενόμην ὡς ὑμεῖς ἦτε; cf. Lagrange, *Galates*, 111. For an interesting parallel between Paul's use of ἀσθένεια in Gal 4:13 and his reference to "the weak" in 1 Cor 9:22, see the present writer's forthcoming article in *Biblica*: "A Note on 'the Weak' in 1 Cor, 9.22."

Mosaic law. On that basis, he now appeals to the Galatians to rid themselves of the nomists and become like him in regard to his Christian liberty.

Paul's original reception by the Galatians is described in vv 13–15. The brief statement in v 12, "you have done me no wrong" (οὐδέν με ἠδικήσατε), which really belongs with these verses, is a litotes and should be understood as expressing an affirmative idea: they had treated him properly.³² Exactly how properly is recounted in what follows.

In these verses there are six major statements, three concerning Paul, and three in regard to the Galatians. Concerning himself, the apostle first reminds his readers that he had preached the good tidings among them, but that he did so on account of bodily infirmity (or, notwithstanding it), and that his condition had subjected the Galatians to the temptation to reject him and his message. Regarding the Galatians, he affectionately recalls how they had resisted their³³ impulse to condemn or loathe him on account of his infirmity, and how they had received him with enthusiasm—so much so that they would have parted with anything, even their own eyes, as an expression of the depth of their attachment to him. It is in this context—where Paul states his desire that the Galatians might return to the true gospel by recollecting what they had once gladly accepted from him—that the apostle uses for the first time the noun ἀσθένεια (or any of its cognates) to refer to himself.

There is some discussion as to the correct translation of the preposition διὰ in v 14. A number of scholars think δι' ἀσθένειαν refers to an *accompanying circumstance*,³⁴ while others construe the expression causally, making the illness the *occasion*³⁵ of Paul's preaching in Galatia. Though the former meaning is not impossible,³⁶

³²It is imprecise to say, as Schlier does (*Galater*, 209), that the statement also applies to the present situation. Although the aorist, as a tense, does not necessarily refer to past time (cf. Charles R. Smith, "Errant Aorist Interpreters," *GTJ* 2 [1981] 207–209), the aorist indicative ἠδικήσατε probably should be given a past signification, as should also the following series of verbs in the aorist indicative.

³³ὑμῶν ("your temptation"), read by κ* A B D* F G it (most) vg Ambrosiaster appears to have better external attestation than the reading μου ("my temptation"), supported by p³⁶ C^{vid} D^{b,c} K P Ψ Byz it^a Chrysostom. The latter pronoun may have replaced the former "in order to alleviate the difficulty of the expression τὸν πειρασμὸν ὑμῶν." Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1971) 596.

³⁴E.g., Oepke, *Galater*, 105, "den begleitenden Umstand"; Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 166; Güttgemanns, *Der leidende Apostel und sein Herr*, 175.

³⁵E.g., Eadie, *Galatians*, 321–22; Betz, *Galatians*, 224; Boice, *Galatians*, 478; Schlier, *Galater*, 210; Mussner, *Galaterbrief*, 307.

³⁶Lagrange (*Galates*, 112) overstates the case when he says that the expression "ne peut avoir qu'un sens: 'à cause d'une maladie de la chair'."

on the whole it seems most likely that the latter significance of *διὰ* is to be preferred here. The continuous or characteristic condition of the preacher would be expressed by *διὰ* plus the genitive,³⁷ not the accusative; but in the Greek text the only reading that was transmitted is *ἀσθένειαν*. And while examples of *διὰ* plus the accusative in inexact usage can be cited (e.g., Rom 3:25; 8:20), the most natural meaning of the word in terms of the context is plainly "because of."

The preposition, then, signifies either that Paul was detained in Galatia through which he had merely intended to pass, or else that he was forced for his health's sake to visit Galatia which he otherwise would not have visited. In the latter case, even if the illness was the occasion of Paul's visit to Galatia, the problem most probably persisted for a period of time while he was there. But while it is best to understand *δι' ἀσθένειαν* as the *specific* cause for Paul's preaching in Galatia, the *general* cause or motivation for preaching lay grounded in the appointment of God which Paul carried out in obedience as a *δοῦλος* of Christ (Gal 1:10) and an *οἰκονόμος* of God (1 Cor 4:1), compelled by a deep sense of devotion to the Lord (2 Cor 5:14-15) and for his sake (2 Cor 4:5, 14). As the latter verse clearly indicates—*ἡ γὰρ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ συνέχει ἡμᾶς*—Paul preached the gospel in the first place *διὰ Χριστόν*, not *δι' ἀσθένειαν*.³⁸

It is generally agreed today that *ἀσθένεια* refers to a physical condition of the apostle, and not to an unimpressive appearance, timidity, the emotional scars from persecution, sexual desires, human frailty in general, or some other figurative meaning. However, a few modern scholars still prefer the metaphorical meaning of the phrase *ἀσθένειαν τῆς σαρκός* over the literal. For example, H. Binder, in his article entitled "Die angebliche Krankheit des Paulus,"³⁹ argues that "seine *asthénēia*, d.h. seine 'Schwachheit', bestand nur darin, dass er teilhatte am menschlichen Wesen."⁴⁰ A purely physical interpretation of *ἀσθένεια* is excluded because "in der Sprache des Paulus bedeutet *asthénēia* nie 'Krankheit', sondern immer 'Schwachheit', 'Kraftlosigkeit'."⁴¹ If this premise is true, it naturally follows that:

Hier wie dort vertritt Paulus den Gedanken der Armseligkeit, der Bedürftigkeit, der Schwäche, der Kraft—und Hilflosigkeit, des zum Scheitern Verurteiltseins—nicht der "leiblichen" Beschaffenheit des

³⁷Cf. 2 Cor 2:4, *διὰ δακρῶν* ("in tears"); Rom 4:11, *δι' ἀκροβυστίας* ("in the condition of circumcision").

³⁸Cf. Theodor Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater* (KNT; Leipzig: Deichert, 1905) 215.

³⁹*TZ* 32 (1976) 1-13.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 13.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 4.

Menschen sondern—seiner Existenz in der "Fleischlichkeit", im "Fleisch", in der Gottesferne.⁴²

Although this interpretation is possible—especially in view of the fact that Paul must have had an especially sturdy bodily constitution to endure his travels and trials (cf. 2 Cor 11:23–33)—the plausibility of Binder's argument diminishes when one considers his major premise in greater detail. Binder expresses the "fact" that Paul never uses ἀσθένεια or its cognates to refer to a physical condition, and concludes from this that therefore Paul cannot have bodily infirmity in mind in Gal 4:13. But Binder's argument at this point is a pure *petitio principii*: his conclusion is not surprising, since it was also his premise! It is not sufficient merely to state that Paul never uses ἀσθένεια in a physical sense; in light of Pauline usage elsewhere this premise is tenuous indeed. Certainly if Paul did ever use the word to describe the illness of others, he could conceivably have employed it to describe his own, and the force of Binder's argument would be considerably weakened.

It is, in fact, manifest that Paul does on occasion employ the word-family to refer to a purely corporeal condition. In the Pastorals we learn that Trophimus remained in Miletus because of an incapacitating illness (2 Tim 4:20), and Timothy was urged to drink wine for medicinal purposes because of his frequent ailments (1 Tim 5:23). Certainly Epaphroditus' distressing condition involved a physical sickness of some sort (Phil 2:26, 27).⁴³ In each of these cases an ἀσθένεια-word is employed. This euphemism usually implies in Greek (and the Pauline letters are evidently no exception) poor health.⁴⁴ In Gal 4:13, the phrase ἀσθένειαν τῆς σαρκός as well as the context of the passage itself is clearly in keeping with this euphemistic usage, meaning "bodily infirmity." It is not surprising that Paul employs this expression for a physical condition, for bodily illness is an inherent quality of the σάρξ,⁴⁵ the old aeon, and the sphere of human activity which is temporal and weak.

⁴²Ibid., 7.

⁴³That the nature of Epaphroditus' condition was physical and not psychological is clear from the context: Only a grave physical condition can account for (a) the Philippians' severe distress of mind, and (b) the expression παραπλήσιον θανάτῳ ("at death's door") in 2:27.

⁴⁴See BAGD 115. Binder's treatment of these passages, found only in a footnote, is inadequate: "Epaphroditus war nicht krank geworden, sondern in eine Situation geraten, der er nicht gewachsen war (Phil. 2, 26). Trophimus blieb nicht krank in Milet zurück, sondern in einer schwierigen, fast aussichtslosen Arbeit (2 Tim. 4, 20). Vielleicht war auch Timotheus nicht krank, als Paulus an ihn 1 Tim. 5, 23 schrieb" ("Die angebliche Krankheit des Paulus," 13n.).

⁴⁵John A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (SBT 5; London: SCM Press, 1957) 20. According to E. Schweizer ("σάρξ, κτλ.," *TWNT* 7 [1964] 124) σάρξ in this context

Therefore, though it is not completely certain that the words ἀσθένειαν τῆς σαρκός must be understood in a literal way as an actual distressing physical condition, it is nevertheless the most probable meaning in this context. This usage is entirely consistent with that in the Pastorals and Philippians where the word-group appears with the obvious meaning of sickness, and harmonizes perfectly with the common meaning of ἀσθένεια in the Synoptic gospels. We must, however, register our agreement with one emphasis of Binder's interpretation, namely, that Paul was, generally speaking, a healthy man. It is evident from both the epistles and the Acts that, in spite of the constant attacks made upon him by Jews and Gentiles alike and the many dangers he continually faced, the apostle remained a surprisingly strong individual. This point is well taken, but it does not exclude the possibility of an occasional prepossessing physical condition, as Binder maintains. We thus agree with the majority of commentators⁴⁶ that the statement δι' ἀσθένειαν τῆς σαρκός should be explained to mean that Paul was suffering from some sort of physical indisposition.

If we are certain that an unpleasant physical condition lay behind Paul's initial visit to Galatia, we cannot be certain of its precise nature. The difficulty of finding an answer lies primarily in the poverty of source materials. The apostle is always reticent to recount his own personal experiences, and when he does it is only briefly and without exception in polemical or argumentative contexts which do not lend themselves to precise forms of expression. That we know little of the person of Paul is not surprising, for his letters, though personal, are basically *pastoral* communications to congregations and are intended for public reading in the context of the churches' meetings. Therefore revelations about "Paul the Man" are largely incidental and usually of ancillary importance to the writer's overall purpose.⁴⁷

This means that we should not expect Paul to define his ἀσθένεια for us in any specific terms. Paul is aware that the Galatians know already what it is, and its mention might have detracted from his

should be understood in its physical sense; so also Bo Reicke, "Body and Soul in the New Testament," *ST* (1965) 201.

⁴⁶Cf. H. Schlier, *Grundzüge einer paulinischen Theologie* (Freiburg; Herder, 1978) 101: "körperliche Hinfälligkeit"; Oepke, *Galater*, 105: "leibliche Krankheit"; Zahn, *Galater*, 215: "eine Krankheit des Leibes"; Betz, *Galatians*, 224: "illness of the flesh"; Eadie, *Galatians*, 323: "infirmity of the flesh"; Hendriksen, *Galatians*, 171: "physical infirmity"; Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms. A Study of Their Use in Conflict Settings* (AGJU 10; Leiden: Brill, 1971) 154: "bodily frailty."

⁴⁷For a brief, but excellent discussion of the autobiographical Paul, see Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 10.

main appeal that is based not so much on his condition but on the Galatians' warm reception of him and his gospel.

In spite of these difficulties, research has fostered a wealth of hypotheses and inferences concerning the precise nature of Paul's ἀσθένεια τῆς σαρκός,⁴⁸ but neither Acts nor Galatians mentions it specifically, and even the most careful examination of the text will reveal no significant clues. The attempt to link Paul's illness to his "thorn in the flesh" (σκόλωψ τῆ σαρκί, 2 Cor 12:7) is common, but despite the similarities in language and subject matter, it is not necessary to find a reference to his σκόλωψ in this text. As Bring notes, to introduce the idea of a chronic ailment here is to introduce a Corinthian nuance which is foreign to the atmosphere of this letter.⁴⁹

If one adopts the South Galatian hypothesis—that Paul is writing to the churches in the *province* of Galatia—it can be argued that Paul's ἀσθένεια τῆς σαρκός was the result of what he suffered from his enemies on the so-called first missionary journey (Acts 13–14). If so, ἀσθένεια refers not to a particular sickness or disease, but to the physical abuse and resultant weakened physical condition which accrued to Paul in the form of maltreatment at Antioch (Acts 13:50, along with Barnabas) and of stoning at Lystra (Acts 14:19), the latter incident being so severe that Paul was left for dead (cf. 2 Tim 3:11).⁵⁰ The advantage of this view is that it accords with the Lucan account of Paul's travels in Acts, but it carries conclusive weight only with those already convinced of the South Galatian theory and the early dating of the letter.

The desire of the Galatians to pluck out (ἐξορύξαντες) their eyes—which they would have done had not the restriction in εἰ δυνατόν intervened—is evidence to some that Paul's ἀσθένεια was a form of ophthalmic disorder (4:15). If the gift could have relieved Paul's poor vision, so the argument goes, the Galatians would have parted with their own eyes quite willingly. However, although some type of eye disorder may have been involved in Paul's infirmity, it is not necessarily the meaning of this verse. The expression "to pluck out the eyes" is a common one both in the OT as well as in a great

⁴⁸E.g., migraine headaches, epilepsy, malaria, rheumatism, chronic ophthalmia, etc. For extensive listings of scholarly opinion on this issue, see esp. K. L. Schmidt, "κολαφίζω," *TWNT* 3 (1938) 818–21; BAGD 441–42; J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1892) 186–91; Eadie, *Galatians*, 329–45.

⁴⁹"Es scheint sich dort aber eher um ein chronisches Leiden und hier um einen akuten Krankheitsfall zu handeln." R. Bring, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1968) 185. But even σκόλωψ in 2 Cor 12:7 may not refer to a chronic physical problem.

⁵⁰So, e.g., Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 30, 166–67.

variety of secular authors,⁵¹ and is most likely used here proverbially to emphasize the willingness of the Galatians to sacrifice their all for Paul: "Cela peut vouloir dire simplement qu'ils étaient prêts à sacrifier pour lui les biens les plus précieux."⁵² Thus τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς is here a synonym for that which is most precious to a man. As to the question, however, whether or not Paul was suffering from an eye ailment, we can draw no certain conclusions of any kind from Gal 4:15.⁵³

On the basis of 4:14—"the temptation to you in my flesh you did not despise nor loathe (οὐδὲ ἐξεπτύσατε⁵⁴)"—others have supposed that Paul was epileptic, taking the aorist of ἐκπτύω literally with the meaning "to spit." While it is true that the ancient Greeks would expectorate at the sight of an epileptic seizure, the word ἐκπτύω contains also a metaphorical sense of loathing or rejecting,⁵⁵ and because the verb is coupled with ἐξουθενεῖν ("to despise"), and follows it, the figurative meaning here is the most likely.

Many other attempts to account for Paul's ἀσθένεια could be listed, but most of the suggestions carry the point too far, and all are open to legitimate inquiry and controversy. Whether or not Paul had one of the specific conditions mentioned above is finally a matter of pure conjecture. At any rate, in his use of ἀσθένεια the writer assumes that his readers are familiar with the word and the idea it connotes so that no further explanation is required.

As to the specific identity of the illness, then, it is possible to reconstruct only the most general description. We can infer from the context that the malady was suitable to give at least the impression that Paul's person and message were weak, even an object of derision to those who saw him in such a condition. We know further that this situation hindered Paul—at least he felt it could—but was overcome by the gracious reception of the Galatians who accepted the ill missionary as if they had been receiving the Lord himself. The illness must have also been severe enough to hinder Paul's mobility, yet not so severe as to prevent him from preaching the gospel. At the same

⁵¹See Eadie, *Galatians*, 327, who cites such examples as Deut 32:10; Ps 17:8; Prov 7:2; Zech 2:8; Horace, *Sat* ii.5, 33; and Terence, *Adelph*, v. 7–5.

⁵²André Viard, *Saint Paul: Epître aux Galates* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1964) 95.

⁵³The reference to "large letters" (πῆλικά γράμματα) in 6:11 is said to support this view, but the expression is better understood to mean that Paul enlarged his writing to emphasize his personal greeting and impress his authority upon his readers than on the hypothesis that he so wrote because of age, infirmity, or lack of practice in writing Greek characters; cf. Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 220–21.

⁵⁴p.⁴⁶ lacks these words, no doubt an oversight of a scribe due to homoioteleuton.

⁵⁵BAGD 244; Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (4th ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1955) 199.

time Paul must have found enough relief to permit him to continue his journey later.

But all we can say with certainty is that ἀσθένεια refers to some bodily infirmity which befell Paul and which was a potential source of offense to the Galatians. Since we do not have enough information for a diagnosis, all the suggestions as to the exact nature of his illness must remain conjectures.

CONCLUSION: WEAKNESS IN GALATIANS

In Galatians Paul's main object is to show that man is free from the law and that faith in Jesus Christ, not works of righteousness, brings salvation and eternal life. An essential part of his argument is the reference to "the elements of the world" which belong to the old aeon and bring men into bondage.

Because the στοιχεῖα are set over against both God and man, Paul's attitude toward the elements is always negative and fiercely polemical. His concern time and again is to demonstrate the total superiority of Christ over all powers, be they ἀρχαί, ἐξουσίαι, δυνάμεις, κύριοι, κυριότητες, ἄρχοντες, θρόνοι, ἄγγελοι or, in our passage, τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου.⁵⁶ This is because to be subservient to the elements means to be in bondage to sin and, eventually, death. Servitude to the στοιχεῖα finds its only remedy in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, who triumphed over them on the cross.⁵⁷ It is therefore beyond Paul that anyone delivered from these elements could desire to return to a position of slavery under them, especially if he had already appropriated the victory of Christ by "coming to a knowledge of God or, rather, being known by God" (4:9).

In Galatians Paul includes in the same category—the στοιχεῖα—the Mosaic law (the rudimentary teaching of the Jews) and the heathen systems from which the majority of the Galatians had been emancipated. These στοιχεῖα are wholly inadequate to secure spiritual deliverance or progress in holiness, a fact which the religious past of all Christians—whether Jew or Gentile—has shown to be true. It is only through the sending of the son (4:4) that status as sonship is conferred. This is achieved by pure grace working through faith. Therefore the στοιχεῖα can be described as ἀσθενῦ καὶ πτωχά, "denn

⁵⁶See Ragnar Leivestad, *Christ the Conqueror: Ideas of Conflict and Victory in the New Testament* (London: S.P.C.K., 1954) 92–95.

⁵⁷The imagery of man's enslavement to and eventual triumph over the elements of the world is one of the major Pauline salvific motifs; see Eldon J. Epp, "Paul's Diverse Imageries of the Human Situation and His Unifying Theme of Freedom," in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology*, ed. Robert A. Guelich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 105–8.

sie können nicht bewirken und verleihen, was Gott durch die Sendung seines Sohnes bewirkt und verliehen hat.”⁵⁸ They are no longer applicable to sons and heirs of God since they have been overcome by Christ the Conqueror and because the situation of slavery has been resolved.

It is therefore important for the apostle to emphasize the helplessness of all men ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in his attempt to contrast the situation of slavery with the present situation of salvation in Christ. In comparison with the power and wealth of the gospel, the old religious systems fade into insignificance. Even the Jewish law, which is both good and God-given (Rom 7:12, 22), when distorted into a means of earning salvation, can be used by Satan to bring men into bondage. Paul can therefore refer to a return to the elements and the adoption of the Mosaic law in the same breath, for the rudimentary teachings of the Gentiles correspond exactly to the ritualistic element in the law which is ἀσθενής to produce life.

In view of this, it is clear that Paul's main contention, and his primary purpose in ascribing to the στοιχεῖα the modifier ἀσθενῆ is to show that since a man is not justified by the keeping of the law, there are no Jewish requirements to be submitted to. Circumcision, feasts, clean and unclean meats, fasts, special days, etc., are now obsolete and have no meaning for the Christian. It is therefore unnecessary to adopt Jewish (or pagan) ordinances, for their observance is a return to the slavery involved in the elements and inevitably will destroy the work of Paul and the faith of his Galatian converts.

Amid the multitudinous possibilities of interpreting Paul's ἀσθένεια in 4:13, it is not easy to find one's way. But if our interpretation of the word's context is correct, then Paul there describes with the term his own corporeal condition which forced him to visit Galatia and which was at first a temptation to the Galatians to despise him. While the translation “illness” is perhaps a tendentious paraphrase for ἀσθένεια in this phrase, it best and most plainly conveys what the author desires to express with the words ἀσθένεια τῆς σαρκός. Of this illness, however, we know only that it existed and had an impact on his travel plans.

Since Paul's entire apostolic ministry was one of travels, the hopes and disappointments involved with his itinerary must have had special significance. In spite of, or better, because of the many frustrations encountered along the way, Paul had a firm conviction that his travel plans were in the Lord's hands. Even the physical problem which stranded him in Galatia proved to be a blessing in

⁵⁸F. Sieffert, *Der Brief an die Galater* (KEK 7; 7th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1880) 238.

disguise: Paul was able to evangelize an otherwise untouched area, thus accomplishing more than he had originally set out to. He learned through that experience that even an illness could be the occasion for preaching, just as later his imprisonment in Caesarea and Rome would work for the dissemination of the gospel.⁵⁹

Through his Galatian experience Paul had also been reminded of his own *Menschlichkeit* and the power of God in spite of it. Just as the στοιχειᾶ belong to the old aeon, so in a sense does Paul. But this continuing participation in the κόσμος through suffering, weakness and illness forces him to look away from himself to the power of God for strength and sustenance. Paul's existence as an "apostle of weakness" in an earthen pot (2 Cor 4:7) has tremendous significance in that it serves to make clear to others that the source of his power is God and not himself. Evidently the Galatians recognized this, for they did not receive him on the basis of his personal appearance, physical health or rhetorical prowess, but because he was indeed the messenger of God bearing the word of Christ (Gal 4:14).

⁵⁹Mussner (*Galaterbrief*, 307) aptly states: "Für einen Mann wie Paulus wurde alles zum καιρός, wenn es galt, das Evangelium zu verkündigen."