

Galatians 4:8-11

“Are the Sabbath and Appointed Times Really ‘weak and worthless elemental things?’”

“However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But 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? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.”

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is easily recognized to be the most difficult book of the Bible for generally all people within today’s Messianic movement.¹ Understandably, those aspects of Galatians where the Torah or Law of Moses, or issues like circumcision and proselytism, are directly addressed, receive more attention than other parts of the letter. All readers are agreed that the Galatians were certainly not approaching God’s Torah from the right presupposition of obedience to the Lord being a Spirit-generated result of salvation. Galatians 4:8-11 is a passage that Messianic people do tend to not ignore or avoid, yet further engagement with some of its details is needed.

Galatians 4:8-11 has been frequently approached from the perspective that the non-Jewish Galatians were keeping the seventh-day Sabbath and appointed times, something that the Apostle Paul was firmly in disapproval of. In fact, various Galatians commentators actually conclude that a figure like Paul considers the seventh-day Sabbath and appointed times to be quantitatively indifferent from pagan rituals, by extension making the “weak and miserable principles” (NIV) the commandments of God’s Torah. Certainly, there does need to be a better way to approach this passage and what is presented.

For sure, Messianic people of all varieties have been quoted Paul’s statements of Galatians 4:8-11 at one time or another, usually by a Christian friend or family member criticizing their observance of the seventh-day Sabbath/*Shabbat* and the appointed times. There has been, in various Galatians resources written by Messianic teachers, examination of Galatians 4:8-11 which has offered some alternative proposals to what has traditionally been viewed as a Pauline dismissal of the *moedim* (מוֹעֲדִים). These tend to involve the “days and months and seasons and years” as either representing (1) the Roman Emperor or political cult, or (2) the misuse of the Torah-prescribed appointed times, negatively influenced by Jewish mysticism and/or mystery cults.²

4:8 Vs. 8-10 are quite informative regarding some of the bad spiritual dynamics that had been unleashed upon the Believers in Galatia. Paul had just spoken to the Galatians, detailing to them what it meant to be a “slave” and not being “an heir through God” (v. 7). He now says, “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods” (NIV). The beings he describes to the Galatians are *tois phusei mē ousin theois* (τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὐσιν θεοῖς), “those not by nature gods” (YLT). This concerns the Galatians’ pre-conversion state of worshipping the gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon, and/or serving any other dark supernatural forces.³ We should immediately be reminded of how during their visit to Galatia, Paul and Barnabas were worshipped as Hermes and Zeus in Lystra (Acts 14:11-13). Hans Dieter Betz points out, “identifying ‘pagans’ as ‘ignorant of God’ and the converts as ‘those who know God’ comes from missionary language; its roots are in the Old Testament and in Hellenistic Judaism.”⁴ In going to Galatia, Paul had acted as a good Jew who genuinely desired to share the goodness of the God of Israel, and now news of His Messiah, to the nations.

¹ This section has been adapted and expanded from the commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic* (2007/2012) by J.K. McKee.

² Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, pp 557-558 approaches these verses somewhat vaguely, thinking that legalism is the basic issue.

³ Cf. Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp 1908, 1910; also Romans 1:19-23; 1 Corinthians 8:5-6; 1 Thessalonians 4:5.

⁴ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp 213-214.

Galatians 4:8-II Sabbath and Rest in the Apostolic Scriptures

By using the terminology “by nature” (*phusei*), Paul recognizes that what the Galatians formerly served were indeed something, namely demonic powers, but *not the same* as the One God of Israel. He will later tell non-Jewish Believers in Asia Minor, “you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and **without God** in the world” (Ephesians 2:12, RSV). Being separate from the One God of Israel, such people had no hope. And as Paul tells the Corinthians, “the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God” (1 Corinthians 10:20). In not knowing the God of Israel, the supernatural beings that the Galatians previously served were in truth, demonic entities posing as their “gods.”

From this point of view, several commentators such as Ben Witherington III, Mark D. Nanos, and Tim Hegg⁵ all suggest that the Galatian Believers had once participated in the Roman political cult prior to receiving the gospel. And now, for some difficult reasons, they were turning back to things that they had already escaped from via their newfound faith in Yeshua. Hegg speculates on possible factors that contributed to what he concludes was a likely return to participation in the Emperor cult, by the non-Jewish Galatians:

[There was] a great dilemma for the believing Gentiles. On the one hand, Paul had forbidden them to become proselytes, since by doing so they would be acquiescing to the idea that covenant status was based upon being Jewish. Yet on the other hand, they could not participate in the Imperial cult, which included offering sacrifices to the gods and to the Emperor himself, and still maintain their true confession of Yeshua. They were faced with only one option: suffer for the name of Yeshua.

“...[I]t seems very probable that the Gentile believers at Galatia to whom Paul was writing were seeking to ‘straddle the fence,’ maintaining their connection with the synagogue while at the same time returning to the required participation in the Imperial cult. This made the Influencer’s message all that much more appealing: if they were to undergo the ritual of a proselyte, they would be declared Jews, and would be exempt from involvement in the rituals of Emperor worship. Though they would suffer some persecution and estrangement from their Roman community and families, they would be free from the persecution of Rome. Thus the Influencer’s message appeared as ‘good news’ after all!”⁶

The thought here is that the non-Jewish Galatians were in a tough position if they did not want to be persecuted for their Messiah faith. If they went through ritual proselyte circumcision to be reckoned as God’s own, they would be formally regarded as members of the Jewish community and exempt from the Roman political cult. If they did not endure persecution that could come, then the return to “days and months and seasons and years” involved some, although possibly limited, participation in veneration of Caesar and the gods. A figure like the Apostle Paul would certainly not have approved of this!

This is not an unuseful approach. However, as is seen in some of the further suggestions on v. 10 following—which take into account the *stoicheia* targeted—there is a more viable approach to what the “days and months and seasons and years” were, involving the appointed times negatively influenced by astrology and mysticism.

4:9 The Apostle Paul proceeds to ask the Galatians, “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 principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?” (NIV). Of significant importance here is not just that the Galatians came to know the One God of Israel, the Creator of the Universe, but that this

⁵ Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp 297-298; Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul’s Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), pp 268-269; Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2002), pp 158-160.

Witherington is alone among these commentators in concluding that the Galatians, having left the Emperor cult, were turning to observing the appointed times of the Torah.

⁶ Hegg, *Galatians*, 157; also D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Holy Epistle to the Galatians: Sermons on a Messianic Jewish Approach* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2011), pp 205-206 who specifically thinks that non-Jewish God-fearers would not have been exempt from the Emperor cult.

A similar orientation is offered by Skip MacCarty, “The Seventh-Day Sabbath,” in *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views*, 31.

Messianic Sabbath Helper

One God of Israel actually came to know them and desired a relationship with them. As Paul states it later in 1 Corinthians 8:3, "but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him." When Paul had written the Galatians, some time after his visit to them, they found themselves drifting away from Him and turning to things that they should have dispensed with following their conversion.

Take important notice of the fact that Paul tells the Galatians, "how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things. . .?" (NASU). He employs the verb *epistrephō* (ἐπιστρέφω), which can mean, "to return to a point where one has been, turn around, go back" (BDAG).⁷ Even more significant is the fact that the form *epistrophe* (ἐπιστρέφετε) appears in the present active indicative, "you are {presently} returning," indicating that this problem was currently in process and could likely be avoided. (English translations understandably render *epistrophe palin* [ἐπιστρέφετε πάλιν] as "turn back again," given the presence of *palin* [πάλιν] or "again," and "return back again" would seem a bit redundant to English readers.) But what were the Galatians specifically returning to? Were the things that the Galatians were returning to practices that they had already followed during their previous life in paganism?

Paul specifies that what the Galatians were returning to were *ta asthenē kai piōcha stoicheia* (τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα): "the weak and beggarly elemental spirits" (RSV), "the weak and bankrupt elemental forces" (HCSB), "weak and worthless principles" (TLV). These *stoicheia* (στοιχεῖα) are often interpreted by Christian theologians as actually being the commandments of the Torah, with Paul considering such instructions to be no different than paganism. This is a conclusion witnessed in several Galatians commentaries:

- Richard N. Longenecker: "[B]y taking on Torah observance Gentile Christians would be reverting to a pre-Christian stance comparable to their former pagan worship...Paul's lumping of Judaism and paganism together in this manner is radical in the extreme."⁸
- Richard B. Hays: "Paul is suggesting that Judaism's holy observances are, in effect, no different from paganism's worship of earthly elements."⁹
- Thomas R. Schreiner: "Paul is startled that the Galatians are turning back to their old ways, and he apparently thinks that devotion to the Mosaic law is just another form of paganism!...Paul equates subjection to Torah with paganism!"¹⁰

Indeed, other than suggesting that the *stoicheia* that the Galatians **were returning to were pagan practices** similar to those they had left after receiving Yeshua into their lives, theologians with an anti-Torah bias tend to be left with only one other alternative: Paul considers God's commandments in the Torah to be no different than pagan observances. *This alone should be the very reason for rejecting this interpretation!* Paul does absolutely expect the Galatian Believers to adhere to "the Torah of Messiah" (6:2, TLV), the Torah as interpreted and demonstrated via Yeshua's own ministry service.

Readers should rightly recognize that the Galatians were returning to things that they should have left following their reception of the gospel, but the conclusions that too many draw are not consistent with this thought. Beverly R. Gaventa is one who asserts, "their desire to take up the observance of Jewish law constitutes nothing less than a relapse to the 'elemental spirits.'"¹¹ A

⁷ BDAG, 382.

⁸ Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*, Vol. 41 (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990), 181.

⁹ Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al. *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 11:287.

¹⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 278.

¹¹ Beverly R. Gaventa, in James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1381.

Galatians 4:8-II Sabbath and Rest in the Apostolic Scriptures

more toned down perspective is reflected by G. Walter Hansen, who concludes that Galatian observance of the Torah must have taken away the focus being the Messiah:

“Paul’s words *all over again* raise the alarming possibility that turning to the observance of the Mosaic law after conversion to Christ is actually comparable to taking up a pre-Christian position of pagan worship...The only way to understand Paul’s equation of observing the law and pagan worship is to recognize that whenever the observance of law takes the place of Christ as the basis of relating to God, it is as reprehensible as pagan worship.”¹²

While trying to emphasize the centrality of the Messiah for born again Believers is important, Galatians commentators have widely failed at emphasizing the need to live in obedience to *at least* the moral and ethical principles of God’s Torah. Saying that former pagans striving to obey God’s Law are really not obeying God and relapsing into paganism, is a conclusion which will facilitate lawlessness, *not* holiness and sanctification.

4:10 Paul asks the Galatians how they can return to being enslaved to the *stoicheia* (v. 9), by chastising them “You observe days and months and seasons and years.”¹³ Were the Galatians turning to the appointed times of the Lord, such as the weekly Sabbath, festivals such as Passover or Tabernacles, and remembering sacred seasons such as Counting the Omer to Pentecost or the Ten Days of Awe between the Festival of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement? This is what a majority of interpreters tend to conclude.

John R.W. Stott is widely alone in his comment on v. 10, as he does not specify what such “days and months and seasons and years” are, or may be. He instead focuses on the Galatians’ spiritual condition, asserting, “your religion has degenerated into an external formalism. It is no longer the free and joyful communion of children with their Father; it has become a dreary routine of rules and regulations.”¹⁴

It is very easy to divide up “days,” “months,”¹⁵ and “seasons and years” as applying to the appointed times of the Lord seen in the Torah, but there are some important factors that cannot be ignored. Witherington, for example, makes the interesting observation, “Commentators have often tried to parallel this list with various Jewish sources, but in fact there is no Jewish list that actually matches up with this list. . . Paul has provided here a generic list that could apply equally well to Jewish as well to pagan observances.”¹⁶ Witherington does, though, mistakenly conclude that the misled Galatians were in the process of formally observing the appointed times of the Torah.

¹² G. Walter Hansen, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 127.

¹³ Note that some translations like the NIV and NRSV extrapolate v. 10 with “special days” (the HSCB at least has “*special days*” noted in *italics*), although all the Greek has is *hēmeras...kai mēnas kai kairous kai eniautous* (ἡμέρας . . . καὶ μῆνας καὶ καιροῦς καὶ ἐνιαυτούς), “days. . . and months, and times, and years” (YLT).

¹⁴ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 108.

¹⁵ Isaiah 1:14 is sometimes referred to as meaning that God foresaw a time when His appointed times would no longer be useful for His people. As the Prophet declares, “I hate your new moon *festivals* and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing *them*.” But is this really a declaration against the importance of remembering the *moedin*, or a reflection on the wickedness of the Southern Kingdom of Judah?

Notice that God calls what the people were observing *chodshekhem u’moedekhem* (חֳדָשֵׁיהֶם וּמוֹעֲדֵיהֶם), specifically “**your** new moon *festivals* and **your** appointed feasts.” This is an indication that *how* the people were observing these things—improperly—was dishonoring to Him, and not that proper obedience to Him suddenly becomes wrong. The emphasis from God on these things being “**your**” places the burden of proof on the people remembering them; it does not all of a sudden mean that they do not have Divine origin from Him. Surely the latter description does not classify God’s appointed times or the Torah that specifies them.

God placing the burden of proof on His people is not something unique to the Tanach. In Exodus 32:7 He tells Moses, “Go down; for **your people** [*amekha*, אֱמֶכָה], whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.” As Moses reminds the Lord, “O LORD, why does **Your anger** burn against **Your people** whom **You** have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?” (Exodus 32:11), indicating that although the people have sinned against Him, He was still the One who led them out of Egypt.

¹⁶ Witherington, *Galatians*, 299; cf. Betz, 218.

Messianic Sabbath Helper

The list we see in Galatians 4:10 is generic, unlike Colossians 2:16 which specifically references “a new moon or a Sabbath day.”¹⁷ What this means is that the categories of observance that the Galatians were returning to *can involve more* than just the Biblical appointments themselves. Frequently, the *stoicheia* targeted by Paul in vs. 3 and 9, are associated with the elements of paganism like earth, water, air, and fire (corresponding to the Greek deities Demeter, Poseidon, Hera, and Hephaestus)—or the sun, moon, and stars.

It is very easy to speculate on the kinds of things that the non-Jewish Galatians would have been influenced by in Greco-Roman paganism—whether it be the standard Greco-Roman pantheon of gods and goddesses, strange philosophies, and/or mystery religions and cults—prior to them receiving the gospel. Yet, it also has to be noted that various sectors of Second Temple Judaism, sectors present in the First Century, were likewise infected with ungodly beliefs and ideas, such as the acknowledgement of “Fate”¹⁸ as a force in the universe. The historian Josephus attests how there were various persons among the Pharisees and Essenes, which both believed in Fate:

“Now for the Pharisees, they say that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but are not caused by fate. But the sect of the Essenes affirm, that fate governs all things, and that nothing befalls men but what is according to its determination” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 13.172).¹⁹

The Jewish philosopher Philo would recognize the function of *stoicheia*, on the breastplate of the high priest:

“Now of the **three elements** [*stoicheiōn, στοιχεῖων*], out of which and in which all the different kinds of things which are perceptible by the outward senses and perishable are formed, namely, **the air, the water and the earth**, the garment which reached down to the feet in conjunction with the ornaments which were attached to that part of it which was about the ankles have been plainly shown to be appropriate symbols; for as the tunic is one, and as the aforesaid three elements are all of one species, since they all have all their revolutions and changes beneath the moon, and as to the garment are attached the pomegranates, and the flowers; so also in certain manner the earth and the water may be said to be attached to and suspended from the air, for the air is their chariot” (*Life of Moses* 2.121).²⁰

Here, Philo concluded that the basic elements of the world—in which the pagans also believed—functioned in the breastplate of the high priest. Similar to Fate controlling the destinies of people, these basic elements here communicated messages to the high priest of Israel.

How could, at least some of, the Jewish people of the First Century period have been entertaining, what are at the very least *odd ideas* about Fate and the elements of the world? A Bible reader needs to seriously consider the thrust of a passage like Deuteronomy 28:64, where God decrees, “Moreover, the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, which you or your fathers have not known.” While the Jewish exile to Babylon was quantitatively over in the First Century C.E., there was a Jewish Diaspora community in the Mediterranean, and as a Roman province Judea was not totally immune from outside religious influences. While the forces of the world, with its nefarious elements, were surely guarded against by many Jews, one cannot claim

¹⁷ Colossians 2:16 is commonly interpreted as likewise being a “proof text” against the continued validity of the Torah’s appointed times. Yet, to conclude that Paul is speaking against the appointed times in this passage is to conclude that the appointed times are not just “the elementary principles of the world [*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*],” but also “philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men” (Colossians 2:8).

This is further examined in the author’s commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic*.

¹⁸ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 529; cf. Betz, pp 204-205; James D.G. Dunn, *Black’s New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 213.

¹⁹ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 275.

²⁰ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 501.

Galatians 4:8-II Sabbath and Rest in the Apostolic Scriptures

total pureness of thought when it came to the Judaism of Paul's day. While the pagans were by far worse off, "the elemental things of the world" did affect the Jewish people of the First Century.

Paul intending his remarks about the "the elemental things of the world," to not only include aspects of First Century paganism, but also **aspects of paganism that negatively influenced Judaism**, need to be seriously weighed. David H. Stern does point out, in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, "Jews, though knowing the one true God, were sometimes led astray by demonic spirits."²¹ Hegg further explains, "This demonic 'worldview' had also influenced the Judaisms of the day, and had, to one extent or another, become the thinking of the common man, whether Jew or Gentile."²²

Consider the fact that the people in Pisidia, a part of Galatia (Acts 14:23-25), frequently practiced augury, or predicting the future by noticing the flight of birds.²³ This would have been well classified within the prohibitions given in the Torah in Deuteronomy 18:10 regarding omens and divination. Somehow, superstitious practices were a part of the culture or subculture seen in Galatia—and this may affect how readers interpret what the "days and months and seasons and years" involved.

There is a standing opinion that what the Galatians were actually returning to were not the *moedim* (מוֹעֲדִים) of the Torah, properly, but instead were the appointed times inappropriately used or abused. As Gerhard F. Hasel actually states in the *ABD* entry on "Sabbath," "Within the context of the Galatian Judaizing heresy, 'sabbath' seems to refer to something other than wholesome weekly sabbath-keeping as the majority opinion holds."²⁴ Reflective of the conclusion that the "days and months and seasons and years" are the Sabbath and appointed times saturated with non-Biblical, mystical, or proto-Gnostic elements introduced by the Judaizers/Influencers, is Samuel J. Mikolaski:

"Such mummery included *days* (sabbaths), *months* (new moons), *seasons* (recurrent festivals), and *years* (jubilee years). 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. The *elemental spirits* of this age refer probably to the ethos of an age traceable in part to pagan astrological mythology, but which had become a religious habit as much as, and perhaps more than, a metaphysical system (*cf.* Col. 2:8)."²⁵

The notes in the 2009 *Wesley Study Bible* state, "This may refer to religious calendar observances that involve the movement of stars and planets, often believed in the ancient world to be controlled by spirits (vv. 9-11)."²⁶

That some nefarious influence could assert itself in association with "days and months and seasons and years," among the non-Jewish Galatians observing the Torah-prescribed appointed times, needs to be recognized, given how in some Second Temple Jewish literature, an over-importance was given to the luminaries:

"True is the matter of the exact computation of that which has been recorded; for Uriel—whom the Lord of all the creation of the world has ordered for me (in order to explain) the host of heaven—has revealed to me and breathed over me concerning the luminaries, the months, the festivals, the years, and the days. He has the power in the heaven both day and night so that he may cause the light to shine over the people—sun, moon, and stars, and all the principalities of the heaven which revolve in their (respective) circuits. These are the orders of the stars which set in their (respective) places, seasons, festivals, and months" (1 *Enoch* 82:7-9).²⁷

²¹ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 556.

²² Hegg, *Galatians*, pp 142-143.

²³ Cf. Keener, *IVPBB*, 363.

²⁴ Gerhard F. Hasel, "Sabbath," in *ABD*, 5:855.

²⁵ Samuel J. Mikolaski, "Galatians," in *NBCR*, 1100.

²⁶ "The Letter of Paul to the Galatians," in Joel B. Green, ed., *The Wesley Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 1428.

²⁷ E. Isaac, "1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 60.

Messianic Sabbath Helper

"And the LORD set the sun as a great sign upon the earth for days, sabbaths, months feast (days), years, sabbaths of years, jubilees, and for all of the (appointed) times of the years" (*Jubilees* 2:9).²⁸

It would be very easy for the non-Jewish Galatians, many of whom were unbalanced and insecure in their Messiah faith, to be negatively influenced by such sentiments. Daniel C. Juster, in his book *Jewish Roots*, draws the quite useful conclusion:

"The full context [of Galatians 4:8-10] has prompted many commentators to hold that Paul here is not speaking of Jewish biblical celebrations *per se*. There must have been another problem in Galatia, it is thought. This problem, it is said, is connected to astrology. It is also known that heretical groups existed which *connected some of the Jewish holidays to astrology* and superstition. Paul could not be speaking of celebrations given by God as putting people under the bondage of evil spirits! Nor could he be speaking of Jewish holidays in saying that they, a non-Jewish group, are *turning back* to weak and beggarly elemental spirits.

"Apparently what Paul refers to is a drift into superstition connected to special years, days, and seasons—akin to astrology. This is bondage, for during such days, some actions are safe and others are unsafe, some endeavors are to be undertaken and will be especially fruitful, while others are especially dangerous. This actually brings bondage to evil spirits. There may have been a perverted Jewish content added to some of this."²⁹

If the "appointed times" that the Galatians were "returning to" were the appointed times somehow infused with the *stoicheia* that they should have left behind in paganism—things that affected (fringe sects of) Judaism as well—**then Paul would indeed be concerned for the Galatians**. It makes absolute sense for him to later say, "For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law" (6:13, ESV), if the "appointed times" the Influencers were advocating had elements of astrology, mysticism, and proto-Gnosticism. F.F. Bruce, while arguing that the practices described in v. 10 are the more "standard" appointed times, at least does admit "if former pagans accepted the Jewish calendar, old astral associations could easily reassert themselves."³⁰ In this case, Paul was not concerned at all for the Galatians remembering things such as Passover or the Day of Atonement, **but was instead deeply concerned that customs involved with these appointed times**—advocated by his opponents—**mirrored practices that they had left behind in paganism**. In this case, then, the practices that the Judaizers/Influencers would have introduced to this end were explicitly prohibited in the Torah:

"There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you *to do so*" (Deuteronomy 18:10-14; cf. 2 Kings 21:6).

Even though the Torah expressly prohibits witchcraft and divination, and specifically states "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18, KJV), the fact of the matter is that such things were practiced in ancient Judaism, and continue in parts of Judaism to this day through Kabbalah and Middle Eastern meditation.³¹ *Everyman's Talmud*, a condensed collection of writings from the Jewish Rabbis over the centuries, indicates,

"The Talmud reveals very clearly a conflict between the pure, rational doctrines of the Bible and the debased beliefs and superstitions which pervaded the world in which the Jews lived. The

²⁸ O.S. Wintermute, trans., "Jubilees," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 56.

²⁹ Daniel Juster, *Jewish Roots: Understanding Your Jewish Faith*, revised edition (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2013), pp 159-160.

³⁰ F.F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 207.

³¹ Consult the article "The Effect of Mysticism and Gnosticism on the Messianic Movement" by J.K. McKee, appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*.

Galatians 4:8-II Sabbath and Rest in the Apostolic Scriptures

Scriptures vehemently denounced every kind of magical practice and all attempts to pierce the veil which conceals the future from human men by means of divination. We see several Rabbis, particularly in the early period, waging a brave fight to stem the tide of sorcery which threatened their community, but in vain. In the later period even Rabbis succumbed, and credulity prevailed over faith.”³²

The Galatians appear to have been errantly influenced by those who had a mix of God’s Torah, as well as divination and witchcraft. In this case the problem in Galatia may be assumed to involve not only the Influencers demanding ritual proselyte circumcision for the new, non-Jewish Believers, but the Influencers themselves being very misled, immature individuals. This may be a result of over-compensating for wanting to have close relations with the Synagogue, hence the adoption of Jewish mystical errors, or many of them being new proselytes themselves, and individuals open to any tradition or practice considered to be “of Judaism” without any discernment for what was good or evil.

Somehow, many Galatians found themselves being misled by the claims of the Judaizers/Influencers, who were persuading them to adopt things that involved worship practices that were no different than those that they followed in paganism and had negatively influenced ancient Judaism as well (*stoicheia*). Going back to Paul’s comments in Galatians 1:8, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!”, we should also be reminded that “Some Jewish mystics of the period claimed revelations from angels. . . Oaths and curses were familiar in ancient religion, magic and everyday life” (*IVPBBC*).³³ There were Jewish teachers who claimed to see visions from God, and/or have special insight. Paul encountered one of them at Paphos (on his way to Galatia) whose name was Bar-Yeshua (Bar-Jesus):

“When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith” (Acts 13:6-8).

Bar-Yeshua is called a *magos* (μάγος). *AMG* notes that “Magi specialized in the study of astrology and enchantment and thus were known as enchanters, magicians. . . Also spoken of a magician, sorcerer, diviner.”³⁴ Is it possible that Paul had warned the Galatians about such people, as he told the Galatians about his previous travel before seeing them? Could Paul have explained to the Galatians about how Bar-Yeshua, a Jewish false prophet, was dangerous and to stay away from people like him? This certainly needs to be considered if the Judaizers/Influencers practiced similar errors.

Concurrent with this, Maxie D. Dunnam actually applies v. 10 as relating to Christians in today’s Church who accept “innocent” forms of spiritism or witchcraft. He explains,

“How many people in America read their horoscopes daily and are influenced by the word for that day? Maybe more than seek a word from God through Scripture and prayer! How many people, even within the church, think they are more influenced by the sign under which they were born (Cancer, Leo, Aries, etc.) than the sign of the Cross under which is our only salvation?

“Paul is consistent in his teaching about idolatry. Accepting a creed, obeying a law, eating a sacrament, keeping an eye on the stars, looking for guidance in a horoscope, trying to compel or cajole the gods of fortune and fate—are all in the same category of substituting lesser gods for God.”³⁵

³² Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud: The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp 274-275.

³³ Keener, *IVPBBC*, 520.

³⁴ Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 935.

³⁵ Maxie D. Dunnam, *The Preacher’s Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Vol 31 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 84.

Messianic Sabbath Helper

Richard B. Hays, who has favored the view of Galatians 4:8-11 involving Paul's denouncement of the appointed times does, interestingly enough, takes it in the applicational direction of modern people being taken in by the New Age movement:

"In our times, few Christians will be inclined to regard Christian faith as a preliminary step toward the keeping of Jewish Law and festivals, but there are many other forms of 'spirituality' being marketed as more refined understandings of religion that somehow go beyond the primitive particularity of Paul's gospel. Some of these spiritualities claim to be Christian, and others do not. Many books of 'New Age' religion now flooding popular bookstores exemplify this tendency. From the prophetic Pauline point of view, these 'New Age' approaches to spirituality are 'weak and beggarly' attempts to manipulate God or to find God within oneself; therefore, all of them would simply lead back into slavery to the elements of the natural world."³⁶

What might today's Messianic community have among itself for people who claim to accept the whole canon of God's Word as being relevant? How much of that Word is ignored at the expense of Jewish literature—often Medieval Jewish literature well off of the map of the Biblical period—which falls into the category of spiritism and divination? How many of us are ignoring the words that we should be paying attention to? Are there any customs or traditions associated with the *moedim* that might need some reevaluation because they fall well outside of the category of being edifying, more closely mirroring things that belong in paganism?

(Please note that I am very philo-traditional in my own approach to the appointed times,³⁷ and I believe that the significant majority of the Jewish traditions associated with them meet Paul's own criteria of "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things" [Philippians 4:8]. Still, we each must use wisdom and discernment to recognize error when we encounter it, and make sure that something is confirmed by the ethos of the Torah and is spiritually edifying.)

4:11 In v. 11, the Apostle Paul expresses the sentiment, "I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you" (NIV). The verb *kopiaō* (κοπιᾶω) fully means, "**to exert oneself physically, mentally, or spiritually, work hard, toil, strive, struggle**" (BDAG).³⁸ In ministering and nurturing the Galatians, Paul had exerted significant "pains" (NEB) that he now felt might have been wasted in light of their current course of action. He had invested much in them to make sure that they understood the gospel and its implications for the mixed Body of Messiah. But why did Paul specifically feel this way?

A wide number of interpreters think that Paul is in fear for the Galatians because they were now following principles found in the Law of Moses. The *NIV Study Bible* notes on v. 11 actually indicate that Paul is concerned "Due to their return to Pharisaic legalism."³⁹ And, it is not uncommon for Torah obedient Messianics today to be quoted v. 11 quite haphazardly as though they have committed some kind of apostasy against the gospel message of salvation in Yeshua. Furthermore, a great deal of Christians are not aware of the strong commonality between the basic tenets of First Century Pharisaism and modern-day evangelical theology—the principal belief being the doctrine of the resurrection.

Note that the presupposition of a "return to Pharisaic legalism" is not historically valid. The non-Jewish Galatians *prior to their salvation experience* were not practicing Pharisaic Judaism; at the very most they were God-fearers on the outside of the Jewish Synagogue, trying to understand their relationship as human beings to the One God of Israel, and steadily incorporating various principles for right living into their psyche. Paul has just stated previously in v. 8 that their previous spiritual condition was largely being "slaves to so-called gods that do not even exist" (NLT). Thus, any kind of "return" on the part of the Galatians had to involve things akin to their previous

³⁶ Hays, in *NIB*, 10:291.

³⁷ Consult especially Chapter 1 of this publication, "A Summarization of Jewish Shabbat Traditions."

³⁸ *BDAG*, 558.

³⁹ Kenneth L. Barker, ed., et. al., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1825.

Galatians 4:8-11 Sabbath and Rest in the Apostolic Scriptures

religious experience in paganism. **It was for this that Paul was concerned**—and such things had influenced sectors of First Century Judaism.

Would Paul really be concerned because the Galatians could be remembering, among other things, the Passover? The Passover gives God's people the perfect theological picture of God's redemption. Not only does it concern one's deliverance from sin, but also an invitation to God's mountain to join into a relationship with Him and be guided by Him to perform mighty tasks.⁴⁰ Paul himself admonished the Corinthians to celebrate Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). The Passover and the profound message that it entails certainly *did not* parallel anything that the Galatians were to leave behind in paganism. Should our Christian brothers and sisters today, who do not follow the Torah, really be concerned about Messianics keeping things like Passover? Ironically enough, it is often a Passover *seder* presentation, tied to the Last Supper meal of Yeshua, that gets many Christian Believers interested in Messianic things.⁴¹ **The weekly, seventh-day Sabbath is seldom ever thought as being a moral evil, an aberration forced upon human beings.** On the contrary, the Biblical admonitions to rest and be refreshed on the seventh day tend to be welcomed by many evangelical Christian Believers embracing their Hebraic Roots!

What Paul was really concerned about in Galatians 4:8-11 is how the message of the Judaizers/Influencers had significantly disrupted the Galatians' proper spiritual maturity—changing them from the people he had once encountered on his First Missionary Journey (Acts 13-14). They very much appear to have been involved in a form of Sabbath and festival observance, which had been negatively affected by astrology and mysticism, "weak and worthless elemental things" (v. 9).

⁴⁰ Consult the article "The Message of Exodus" by J.K. McKee, appearing in the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper*.

⁴¹ Consult the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics for a series of articles on the significance of the Passover, the Exodus, and Yeshua's redemptive work.

Even while clouded in non-Biblical traditions surrounding "Easter," the Great Vigil of Easter practiced in many Anglican and Episcopal churches on the Saturday night before Easter Sunday directly connects the resurrection of Yeshua to the symbolism and deliverance of the Exodus.

Cf. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp 285-287.