

Paul at Athens: An Examination of His Areopagus Address in the Light of its Historical and Philosophical Background

by

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Introduction:

This paper aims to explain the significance Paul's speech (Acts 17:22-31) in the immediate context of its setting and historical and philosophical background, in order to show how aptly Paul responded to the situation at Athens. I will first discuss the background to the situation of Paul's speech, the culture of Athens, the Areopagus as a place and as a council, the philosophies of the Epicureans and the Stoics, and the altar to the Unknown God. The exegesis of the speech will then show that a knowledge of this background is vital to our understanding of it.

Background:

Paul arrived at Athens after a turbulent time in Thessalonica and Berea, probably in the fall of A.D. 50,¹ or Feb/March 51.² His stay seems to have been unplanned and turned out to be of relatively short duration. He first "reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17). Luke does not state how many days Paul spent there, but from the few converts

¹F.F. Bruce, "Acts of the Apostles," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (1979), s.v.

²H. Wayne House, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 130.

gained the reader gets the impression that it cannot have been very many. House allows approximately two weeks.³ “Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). It is possible that “Paul’s hearers thought he was speaking about two deities, Jesus (the male deity) and Resurrection (the female deity). In light of the fact that there were a number of religions in which the male deity was brought back to life by the female deity, it is possible that Paul’s hearers understood him to be speaking of two gods, Jesus and Resurrection.”⁴ From hearing the words Jesus and Resurrection (v. 18), the Athenians inferred that Paul was advocating “foreign gods.” Athens was familiar with many ‘gods’, but a god called Jesus and a god called ‘resurrection’ were unknown to them. In the Areopagus address Paul also refers to Jesus (“the man appointed”) and the resurrection (“by raising him from the dead”, Acts 17:31).

Athens as Paul Found It

Although Athens had declined in importance since her heyday, she could “still boast of her right to be called a great center of philosophy, architecture and art when the apostle Paul made his celebrated visit.”⁵ It was to this cultural capital of the world that Paul made his way. The Bible implies that Paul came to Athens by ship (“The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast”, 17:14). In that case, “Perhaps as he was sailing from Macedonia to the Piraeus he was struck that as the ship sailed around Sounion, he could see the tip of the spear and the crest of the

³Ibid.

⁴Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 336-7.

⁵D.H. Madvig, “Athens,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (1979), s.v.

helmet of the colossal statue of the Athena Promachos which stood on the Akropolis to commemorate the battle of Marathon.”⁶

The Parthenon, admired by tourists to this day, was the chief temple of Athena on the Acropolis. All over the agora, the market place of about six-acres, there were reminders of pagan religions, including emperor worship, with temples, statues and altars. There was a temple of Ares, a temple of Hephaistos, an altar to Zeus, and statues for the various emperors that were worshiped. There were thirteen small altars dedicated to Augustus alone.⁷ Emperor Claudius, under whose reign Paul arrived at Athens, is even described in one of the inscriptions as “saviour and benefactor.”⁸ There was a cult to Antonia Augusta, designated as θεα Ἀντωνία, in Athens as the place of her conception, complete with a priestess and later a high priest.⁹ No wonder Paul was distressed! As a strict monotheist he would be revolted by the evidences of polytheism. The phrase ‘full of idols’ is κατείδωλον, of which Wycherley writes, “A ‘forest of idols’ gives the full

⁶David W.J. Gill, “Acts and Roman Religion. A. Religion in a Local Setting” in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, Vol. 2 *Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W.J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 85.

⁷David W.J. Gill, “Achaia” in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, Vol. 2 *Graeco-Roman Setting*, 444. A detailed description based on Pausanias is found in Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury *English Translation and Commentary*, being Vol. IV of F.J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part 1, The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 209-210.

⁸Gill, “Achaia,” *The Book of Acts*, 443.

⁹Bruce W. Winter, “Acts and Roman Religion. B. The Imperial Cult,” in *The Book of Acts*, 95.

flavor of the word, just a little heightened.” He interprets the prefix κατά as ‘covered with’ or ‘luxuriant with’.¹⁰ He points out that there was:

one type of figure in particular which made it literally true that the *whole city* was seen to be full of idols. Far more numerous and more widely distributed than all the rest were those most characteristic Athenian dedications, the Herms, square pillars surmounted by the head of Hermes...They were ubiquitous at Athens, and many have been found in the agora excavations... a particularly large ... accumulation stood... at the north-west corner of the agora, between the Poikile (Painted) Stoa and the Basileios (Royal) Stoa; in fact the figures so dominated the scene that the place was called simply ‘the Herms.’ This was the main approach to the agora, by which Paul would probably enter as he came up from Peiraeus.¹¹

The ancient historian Pausanias claimed that it was on this road between Piraeus and Athens that he observed “altars to gods unknown.”¹² Geography and layout of the city suggest that Paul preached in that part of the agora that was most readily accessible when he entered the business part of town after landing at the harbor of Piraeus, i.e. the north-west corner where philosophers used to gather. “The Stoa Poikile or ‘Painted Colonnade’ was famous as the resort of philosophers. It was the place where Zeno had argued and taught, and his followers had received as a result their appellation ‘Stoics’, ‘the men of the Stoa.’”¹³ The abundance of statues in Athens, and in general the evidences of the Athenian religiosity, were remarked on by other

¹⁰R.E. Wycherley, “St. Paul at Athens,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, 19:2 (1968): 619.

¹¹Ibid., 620.

¹²Quoted in Madvig, “Athens.”

¹³Colin J. Hemer, “Paul and Athens: A Topographical Note,” *New Testament Studies*, 20:3 (April 1974): 348.

visitors in addition to Pausanias, such as Livy, Strabo, Sophocles and Josephus.¹⁴ It is in this idol-ridden and philosophically minded city that Paul proclaims the “God who made the world and everything in it” (Acts 17:24).

The Areopagus

In Acts 17:19 Luke writes that “they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus.” The Areopagus was the main governing council of Athens after 86 BC.¹⁵ “The phrase, the Areopagus, can refer either to the body of people or to the actual hill of Ares.”¹⁶ This could mean that they took him to a council meeting on the hill, Mars Hill or Ares Hill, or that they, as a council, questioned him in one of the Stoa, e.g. the Stoa Basileios. “In the first century A.D. the Council met in the Agora, before the Stoa Basileios.”¹⁷ In his 1984 commentary Bruce states: “This aristocratic body, of the most venerable antiquity, received its name from the Areopagus, ‘the hill of Ares’, on which it met in early times, and it retained that name even when it transferred its meeting place to the Royal Portico in the city market-place.”¹⁸ Bruce seems

¹⁴Lake and Cadbury, *English Translation and Commentary*, 209.

¹⁵Gill, “Achaia,” *The Book of Acts*, 441.

¹⁶Ibid., 448.

¹⁷F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles. The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*. 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 335.

¹⁸F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 351-2.

convinced (although he cites no references to prove his point) that by the time of Paul's visit, the council did meet in the market-place. Barnes favors the actual hill as the meeting place, but his argument is not convincing.¹⁹ As Hemer has pointed out, Barnes cites evidence "from the fourth century B.C. and also from Aelius Aristides, and Lucian, all writing in the century after Paul's visit" and Barnes himself showed that "the court did *sometimes* meet in the Stoa Basileios or that at some uncertain date it ceased to meet on the hill."²⁰ The NIV has: "Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus," but the Greek says "in the midst of the Areopagus" (v. 22). This would imply the body of people rather than the hill. It is difficult to stand in the middle of a hill. Also, at the end of his speech, Paul is said to have gone forth from the midst of them (v. 33), translated in the NIV as "At that, Paul left the Council." Barnes' argument that Paul was on trial for introducing a new religion seems hardly more convincing. He states: "Examination of the powers and functions of the Areopagus, therefore, fails to reveal any implausibility in the view that Paul was put on trial accused of introducing a new religion."²¹ Such an argument in the negative can never be totally convincing. He admits that providing proof is a "clearly impossible task" and that his conclusion is a negative one: "the possibility that Paul was actually tried by the Areopagus has not yet encountered adequate refutation."²² In any case, if it were a trial, no

19T.D. Barnes, "An Apostle on Trial," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 20:2 (1969):407-410.

20C.J. Hemer, 342 (italics in original).

21Barnes, 414 (underlining mine).

22Barnes, 419.

mention is made of the verdict. By contrast, Newman & Nida state: “In the choice of words for took and brought, one should not suggest that Paul was under arrest.”²³ According to Daryl Charles, the Areopagus Council had several commissions, one of which was educational. “Acts 17:22-23 may well have been Luke’s report of the Apostle being led before this elite educational commission for an informal inquiry.”²⁴ Formal or informal, it is in this setting of the Council of the Areopagus that Paul gives his somewhat formal speech. R.P. Martin has recognized a Greek rhetorical form in Paul’s speech: “the speech falls into clearly defined sections corresponding to the rhetorician’s model of *exordium* (verse 22), *narratio* (verse 23), *divisio* (verses 24ff.) and *conclusio* (verses 29ff.).”²⁵ However, classical rhetoric usually also had a section devoted to the proof of the case (*confirmatio*) and one on refutation of opposing arguments (*confutatio*) before ending with the conclusion, which was called the *peroratio*. But even if it did not follow the pattern of classical rhetoric very closely, it is clear that the speech was well constructed, as befits his elite audience on that occasion.

The Epicureans

The Epicureans were one of two groups of people Paul encountered in the market place (Acts 17:18). The founder of their movement, Epicurus (341-270 BC), saw his philosophy as a

23Newman & Nida, *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, 337.

24J. Daryl Charles, “Engaging the (Neo-)Pagan Mind: Paul’s Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16-34)” *Trinity Journal* 16:1 (Spring 1995): 52.

25Ralph P. Martin, “Approaches to New Testament Exegesis” in *New Testament Interpretation. Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 247.

substitute religion, and the organization of the “Garden,” where he taught, as an association of friends. The Epicureans were structured like religious associations. This was “expected to provide the basis for the realization of the life of true happiness and friendship... its founder was seen as a divine figure. Friendship, community, and mutual pastoral care were understood as religious duties... These... were not designed to build up the community because the community was there to serve the individual: the only goal was to establish the true happiness and imperturbability of the individual soul.”²⁶ A comparison has been made between the Epicurean communities and the Christian communities founded by Paul: “they [the Epicureans] strove to produce the intimacy of a family among the members, who included male and female, slave and free, bound together by love...Moreover, it is recorded that Epicurus undertook to maintain that unity among groups of his followers settled in different places, by writing letters ‘to the friends’ in those places.”²⁷ In contrast with the Epicureans, however, Paul sought to build up the believers as a community, not just a collection of individuals.

Epicurus based his system on a materialistic conception of the universe:

The Epicurean system was based in the main on the Atomic theory of Democritus. According to this the universe consists of atoms, which are eternal, without origin and without end, constantly forming new combinations, which gradually break up and give rise to new ones. The combination is due to chance acting on the atoms which are eternally falling through infinite space.²⁸

²⁶Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Vol. 1, *History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 147.

²⁷Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 83-84.

²⁸Lake and Cadbury, *English Translation and Commentary*, 210-211.

In Epicureanism, the aim was to be totally independent and imperturbable. Epicureans believed there were no spiritual realities outside of the material world as constituted by the atoms, and even the soul is nothing but a part of this world. For the Epicureans, sense perceptions were basic to all knowledge. Epicurus said that “the criteria of truth are the senses, and the preconceptions, and the passions.”²⁹ Epicureans believed that everything happened by mere chance, and there was no life after death.

For Epicurus, the knowledge that man is destined for physical annihilation was beneficial because it released him from the fear of death. Nor did he have to fear the gods because, although they do exist, they live in the void of space, unconcerned about man. They did not create the universe nor could they exercise any influence over it.³⁰

Pleasure was the real purpose in living, though not necessarily by over-indulgence, but by living “a life of tranquility, free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears (including in particular the fear of death).”³¹ In Epicurus’ own words:

When we say that pleasure is the goal we do not mean the pleasures of the dissipated and those which consist in the process of enjoyment...but freedom from pain in the body and from disturbance in the mind. For it is not drinking and continuous parties nor sexual pleasures nor the enjoyment of fish and other delicacies of a wealthy table which produce the pleasant life, but sober reasoning which searches out the causes of every act of choice and refusal and which banishes the opinions which give rise to the greatest mental confusion (*Letter to Menoecus*, 131-2, Trans. Long).³²

29Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, *Greece and Rome* (London: Search Press, 1946), 403.

30Richard L. Niswonger, *New Testament History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 83.

31Bruce, *Commentary*, (1984), 351.

32As quoted in F.W. Wallbank, *The Hellenistic World* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981), 179.

Because there was a strong cult of Epicurus as founder, philosophic orthodoxy was maintained among Epicureans more than in any other School.³³ However, “during the 1st century B.C. [it] became identified with hedonism. Its decline coincided with the decline of Rome...”³⁴ As I will show, Paul’s speech provides both coincidences with and divergences from Epicurean beliefs.

The Stoics

Stoicism was very popular in the Roman Empire. It was founded by Zeno (born +/- 336 BC),³⁵ who gathered his disciples in the Stoa Poikile on the Athenian *agora*. Zeno gained the respect of the Athenians. “In theology they were essentially pantheistic, God being regarded as the Word-soul.”³⁶ The only goal was to live in agreement with the Logos. Zeno’s successor Chrysippus modified that to: “to live in agreement with nature (*physis*).”³⁷ In later Stoicism, ‘Nature’

33Copleston, 401.

34R.W. Vunderink, “Epicurians,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (1982), c.v.

35There seems to be no agreement on his birth year: Bruce, in his 1984 *Commentary*, gives 340, (p. 349), Koester, *Introduction*, opts for 333/2 (p.147), and Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, says 336/5 (385).

36Bruce, *Commentary*, (1984), 350.

37Koester, *Introduction*, 148.

does not refer to the external physical world... , but to the true ‘nature’ of human beings, i.e., the *logos* which is rational discernment. Human reason is seen as identical with that reason which governs the cosmos. ‘According to nature’ is therefore in Stoic philosophy the same as ‘according to reason’...³⁸

Stoicism lacked the concept of a personal God. It was materialistic and deterministic. But it was not a “meaningless determinism, but rather [they saw the order of the world] as the result of a most perfect legislation in which everything has been perfectly arranged. It was therefore possible to identify the world reason with Zeus, who predetermines and rules everything through his law.”³⁹ Stoics were fatalists: everything that happens must be accepted. However, this “cosmological determinism is modified by their insistence on interior freedom, in the sense that a man can alter his judgment on events and his attitude towards events, seeing them and welcoming them as the expression of ‘God’s Will.’ In this sense man is free.”⁴⁰ In behavior, Stoics aimed for ‘*ataraxy*,’ imperturbability, perhaps comparable to Paul’s ‘contentment’ in Philippians 4:11-13, as the ultimate virtue. All affections are “pathological states of the soul from which the wise man must free himself in order to reach the goal of imperturbability.”⁴¹ The Stoics shared with Paul a belief in a Creator God, but it was not the same God that Paul

38Ibid., 149.

39Ibid.

40Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 389.

41Koester, *Introduction*, 149.

proclaimed. The God of the Stoics would never have personalized himself by being incarnated as a man.

The Altar to the Unknown God

The story of the altar to an unknown God is delightfully told by Don Richardson.⁴² It is “based on a tradition recorded as history by Diogenes Laertius, a Greek author of the third century A.D. in a classical work called *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.”⁴³ In the sixth century before Christ, Athens was struck by the plague. Many offerings to the multitude of Athenian gods had been made, but still the plague continued. Finally, the oracle instructed the Athenians to call on Epimenides, a Cretan hero, to come over and help them. He advised them to have hungry sheep ready by dawn, and to bring them to Mars Hill. Shepherds were instructed to watch them and see if any lay down, which would be very unusual, as the hungry sheep would naturally want to graze first rather than lie down. Then Epimenides instructed the shepherds to mark the spot where the sheep laid down. The sheep that lay down were sacrificed there on special altars which were inscribed “To an Unknown God.” After that the plague was lifted, and the Athenians showed their gratitude to Epimenides. Richardson suggests that only one such altar was preserved by the time of Paul’s visit.⁴⁴ Paul uses the existence of the altar as a lead into his evangelistic message.

⁴²Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts*. Rev. Ed. (Ventura: Regal Books, 1984), 9-25.

⁴³Ibid., 16.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Paul's speech

It is likely that Luke has given a summary of Paul's speech. It was "carried on in Greek and with all the subtleties of Greek logical argumentation."⁴⁵ Bruce reports that the classicists have found the speech to be thoroughly believable, and not a literary invention, in contrast with certain theologians, such as A. Schweitzer, M. Debelius, H. Conzelmann, and P. Vielhauer.⁴⁶ He expounds on the Paulinism of the speech, showing how it was in character with Paul, his other writings, his desire to be "all things to all men," and with the situation in Athens.⁴⁷ Paul seeks to establish various connections with his hearers, from which he can then proclaim the true God. The speech has been recognized as having "delicately suited allusions" to Stoic and Epicurean tenets.⁴⁸

Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. Paul seeks to meet the Athenians on their ground. Even though he is greatly distressed by the many idols, he does not say so. He does not call them "fools" to their faces, nor does he mention that they have "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom. 1:22-3). He uses a fairly neutral expression. All people are, in

⁴⁵Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity & Greek Paideia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 7.

⁴⁶F.F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 243-4.

⁴⁷Ibid., 243-7.

⁴⁸Bruce, *Commentary*, (1984), 363, quoting J.H. Moulton and W.F. Howard, *Grammar of NT Greek* ii (Edinburgh, 1929) p. 8, n. 3.

fact, religious, whether they acknowledge it or not. Even an atheist is religious; he has certain basic presuppositions that control his thought and behavior. In Athens, however, the problem was polytheism, not atheism.

For as I walked around and observed your objects of worship, I even found an altar with the inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD (ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩ ΘΕΩ). Note how polite Paul is: he does not say “your worthless idols”, but again uses a neutral expression: objects of worship. He does not mock their idols. He is neither judgmental nor self-righteous. Paul had taken the time to look around and get the ‘feel’ of their culture and beliefs, including the altar to the Unknown God. It is very well possible that Paul was acquainted with the story of Epimenides and the altar, for in verse 28 he quotes a line from his poetry and in his letter to Titus (1:12-13) he quotes him again, as ‘a prophet’ no less! Both quotations in fact come from the same piece of poetry, which in the original refers to Zeus:

They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one -
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!

But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest forever;
For in thee we live and move and have our being.⁴⁹

If he was indeed familiar with Epimenides’ role in the lifting of the plague centuries earlier, it is not surprising that Paul would use this knowledge as an ‘opener’ in his evangelistic work.

⁴⁹Quoted by Bruce, *Commentary*, (1984), 359. Lake and Cadbury say: “it is very improbable that Epimenides wrote any of the poems attributed to him.” *English Translation and Commentary*, 217. It is likely, however, that Paul had no such doubts.

Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. It is true that Paul is going to proclaim the Unknown God to the Athenians. The ‘I’ is emphatic (*ego*). But the root word for ‘unknown’ is the same as the one that describes the Athenians themselves: they were without knowledge, i.e. what you, being ignorant, worship. He uses what they have confessed not to know about, as a link to what they need to know, i.e. the living God. Charles points out the irony in Paul’s message as it relates to ‘ignorance.’ He is saying this “not only in a city of great learning but before the Areopagus Court, which was composed of thirty of the most literate men of Paul’s day.”⁵⁰

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth... The doctrine of creation is basic to Christian theology. In his letters Paul often assumes (Rom. 1:25, Eph. 1:4, Col. 3:10) or teaches explicitly (Eph. 3:9, Col. 1:15-7, 1 Tim. 4:3-4) that God is the Creator of the whole universe. Of course, this was not a new teaching: the Old Testament similarly proclaimed God as Creator of the world and everything in it.⁵¹ There are no lesser deities to govern over any parts or aspects of creation. It all belongs to the Lord of heaven and earth. Jewish audiences would already know that, but Paul spells it out for the Athenians. The Epicureans would deny that God, or the gods, created the universe. The Stoics would believe in a Creator, but not a transcendent one. Their beliefs were pantheistic.

⁵⁰Charles, “Engaging the (Neo-)Pagan Mind,” 54-5.

⁵¹Apart from the creation story in Genesis there are numerous references to God making all: Ex. 20:11; Ps. 33:6-9; 95:1-7; 136:1-9; Isa. 37:16; 40:26-28; 42:5; 44:24; 45:12, 18, Jer. 10:12; 27:5; 32:17 and 51:15.

... and does not live in temples built by hands. The Athenians are surrounded by temples, even as Paul is speaking. Paul states that God is not confined to buildings, as indeed Euripides had acknowledged: “What house fashioned by builders could contain the form divine within enclosing walls?”⁵² God is omni-present. After Solomon had built the temple, he also confessed that: “The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). Stephen also proclaimed that “the Most High does not live in houses made by men” (Acts 7:48).

And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything... This proclaims what is known in theological terms as God’s aseity, his independence or self-existence. “God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything, yet we and the rest of creation can glorify him and bring him joy.”⁵³ The Epicureans also held to God’s aseity. By saying that God does not need anything, Paul is not saying that God is not pleased with the worship and service of his creatures. Indeed, in his letters Paul gives examples of how we may please the Lord. We should make it our goal to find out what pleases the Lord (Eph. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:9; Col. 1:10, 3:20; 1 Thess. 2:4, 4:1 and 1 Tim. 2:1-4).

...because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. Paul here teaches God’s providential care over his creation. This echoes Psalm 145: 9, 13b, and 17. He had earlier proclaimed God’s generosity to humankind in his address to the pagan people of Lystra (Acts

⁵²Quoted by Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 240.

⁵³Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 160.

14:17). The ‘he himself’ is emphatic (*autos*). The combination of life and breath seems to reflect the thought of Isaiah 42:5:

This is what God the LORD says –
He who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it...

The distant ‘gods’ in Epicureanism were not at all concerned with human life. The Stoics made little distinction between the Creator and creation, but they did believe that God gives life to all. “The Stoics had introduced the concept of *pronoia*, a divine providence that takes care of the world and mankind. They saw the evidence of it in the entire nature of the cosmos. Its eternal laws reveal the divine Logos that penetrates all being.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, “The Stoics had taught that the divine principle and cause of the world was the Logos, which penetrated all that exists.”⁵⁵

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth.

Paul proclaims the unity of the human race, implying their basic equality. The Greeks considered themselves superior to other peoples, but Paul points out that there is no basis for feelings of superiority. The Stoics would not deny the unity of the human race, but they, like the Epicureans, tended to attract only the elite, whereas the Christian faith has proved valid for all classes and conditions of humankind, even if the poor have been especially eager to embrace Christ. The earth that was created by God was especially designed to be a home for his image-bearers, even

⁵⁴Jaeger, *Early Christianity & Greek Paideia*, 67.

⁵⁵Ibid., 28.

before he created Adam and Eve (Ps. 115:16). The references to ‘every nation’ and ‘the whole earth’ are seen by some to be allusions to the stories of Genesis and the Tower of Babel, when the nations were scattered over the earth in response to God’s confusing their language.⁵⁶

...and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

Paul preaches God’s sovereignty over history. God is actively involved in history. There seems to be a reference here to Deuteronomy 32:8 “When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel.”⁵⁷ Alternatively, or additionally, it could refer to God’s determination of the rise and fall of empires, as in Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Dan. 2).

God did this so that men should seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. As long as the pagans lived without the light of the gospel, they groped around in the darkness, like blind people trying to identify some object. Paul now gets to the point that the Athenians should make an effort to find this God. He is immanent as well as transcendent. The idea that God is not far from us was “congenial enough to much pagan philosophy” and could have been “a current philosophical commonplace.”⁵⁸ In the minds of the Athenians, this immanence had more to do with a pantheistic closeness rather than a

⁵⁶James M. Scott, “Luke’s Geographical Horizon,” in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, Vol. 2 *Graeco-Roman Setting*, Gill & Gempf, eds., 542.

⁵⁷Ibid., 543.

⁵⁸Lake and Cadbury, *English Translation and Commentary*, 216-7.

relational closeness such as can be experienced by becoming children of God. The phrase “from each one of us” further suggests that God is interested not just in mankind in general, but in individual people also.

‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ Paul uses the Greek poets to support his argument. He shows understanding of their presuppositions and is able to acknowledge the good in their own theories, which he accepts and appreciates, without buying into them wholesale. He is not trying to Christianize these poets. The first quote, as we have seen, comes from Epimenides. The second is from Aratus and in the original it also related to Zeus:

Never, O men, let us leave him unmentioned,
all ways are full of Zeus and all meeting-places of men;
the sea and the harbours are full of him.
In every direction we all have to do with Zeus;
for we are also his offspring.⁵⁹

“The Zeus of these Stoic poets is of course the *λόγος* (*logos*) or world-principle which animates all things. Their language, however, is largely adaptable to the God of revelation. By presenting God as Creator and Judge, Paul emphasizes his personality in contrast to the materialistic pantheism of the Stoics.”⁶⁰ The God whom Paul proclaims is more than a cosmic force. Bruce refers his readers to Colossians 1:15-17 for comparable language⁶¹, but it is also

⁵⁹Quoted in Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 242.

⁶⁰Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles. The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 338-9.

⁶¹Bruce, *Commentary*, (1984), 360.

reminiscent of Psalm 139, especially vv. 7-10. Paul is not equating Zeus with the Christian God, but he is focusing on the sentiment that mortal men feel some kinship with the divine being as his offspring. He does not mean this in a Stoic, pantheistic sense, but as being made in the image of God.⁶²

Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone - an image made by man's design and skill. Having made his point of contact, Paul then develops it further. Notice how gently Paul corrects them, saying 'we' instead of using the more accusatory 'you.' If people are God's offspring, then God cannot be like gold or silver or sculpture. "His point ... is that since we are the work of God's creation we should not have a lowly view of God like those who fashion idols."⁶³ Paul does not spend a lot of time criticizing their idols, except to point out that they are 'an image made by man's design and skill.' The Greeks would have had to acknowledge this readily.

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. The Greek noun for 'ignorance' here is *agnoia*, again related to his themes in verse 23 of being ignorant and of the unknown. Paul does not dwell on past sins, which he dismisses as 'ignorance.' This is in marked contrast with Paul's letter to the Romans, where he characterizes pagan godlessness and wickedness as being the result of people "suppressing the truth", and people who do not worship God as being "without excuse" (Rom. 1:18-20). In other words,

⁶²Ned B. Stonehouse devotes one section (pp. 25-31) in his essay on the Areopagus address to discussing vv. 24-29 and whether Paul "remains on distinctly Christian ground in his positive affirmations and to gauge the implications of his utilization of quotations from heathen poets." *The Areopagus Address, and other New Testament studies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 1-40.

⁶³Niswonger, *New Testament History*, 82.

when he writes about pagans he is much more severe on them than when he meets them in the flesh. At Lystra Paul had similarly indicated that God “let all nations go their own way” (Acts 14:16). Having prepared the ground and built up some trust between himself and the Athenians, Paul now feels free to call them to repentance. Repentance implies sin, which would be a difficult concept to grasp for people whose thinking had “become futile and [whose] foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). Still, Paul calls them to turn from their evil ways and invites them to worship the true God. Paul implies that God is not going to be tolerant of and patient with idolatry forever. Now is the day of salvation; today is the time to repent!

For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice [righteousness: dikaiosune] by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. Although most religions have a system of rewards for good deeds and punishment for disobedience, the concept of a final judgment is foreign to most non-Christian theologies. The concept of ‘judging the world in righteousness’ is prominent in the Psalms (9:8; 94:15; 96:13 and 98:9).⁶⁴ This is where Paul leaves a gap in his logic: he does not explain why and how Jesus had to live and die in the first place. There is no mention of how Jesus fulfilled all righteousness, or even that he is the Son of God. He goes straight from judgment and ‘the man appointed’ to his resurrection. The resurrection is proof of Christ’s mission and his authenticity, but Paul has not explained Christ’s mission in dying on the cross. He could have explained how “Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Ps. 85:10) in the

⁶⁴Of the 230 mentions of ‘righteousness’ in the NIV, there are 55 in the Psalms, 45 in Isaiah and 75 in the NT.

work on the cross. The teaching about the resurrection proves to be the dividing line between those who sneered and those who became followers.

Outcomes

At the mention of the resurrection, some sneered and some believed. “There is no real support for the theory that the division ran along party lines, the Epicureans being the mockers and the Stoics the ones who showed more interest. But Stoicism undoubtedly has a greater affinity to biblical teaching than Epicureanism.”⁶⁵ As a culture, Greeks were not interested in the resurrection of the body. They would have considered that an absurd notion. Following Plato, they thought of the body as ‘the prison house of the soul,’ and death as a release from that prison. They were more interested in the immortality of the soul, except for the Epicureans, who did not believe in any kind of afterlife and specifically rejected the possibility of resurrection. For them, “death is nothing but dissolution, in fact dissolution of the soul, which simply dissolves into the atoms by which it was constituted, it is impossible to experience death and, therefore, there is no reason to fear it.”⁶⁶ The Stoics, on the other hand, believed that all souls “return to the primeval Fire at the conflagration” and only the souls of the wise persisted after death until the conflagration.⁶⁷

Of the few men (*andres*) and the others who believed, only two are named: Dionysius and Damaris. The former was a member of the Aeropagus; a member of the local élite.

⁶⁵G.W. Bromiley, “Stoics,” *ISBE*, Vol. 4, (1988), s.v.

⁶⁶Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 147.

⁶⁷Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 393.

Richardson considers it significant that he was named after the god Dionysus, “whose theology included a death-resurrection concept.”⁶⁸ Charles reports that Eusebius wrote that “Dionysius the Areopagite, a member of the elite Areopagus Council, converted to Christ through Paul’s preaching and went on to become a bishop in the church” and that he was martyred for his faith.⁶⁹ Of Damaris we know nothing further, but from the fact that she is also named, it would appear that she was a woman of some standing. She could have been converted at the synagogue or at the agora. The ‘others with them,’ i.e. with Dionysius and Damaris, likely were a mixed group of men and women (the pronoun is masculine plural, but Luke does not use a masculine noun as he did at the beginning of the sentence).

Some, like Sir William Ramsay, have portrayed Paul as being “disappointed and perhaps disillusioned by his experience in Athens”⁷⁰ and that after this meager harvest he went on to Corinth “resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). In other words, Paul has learned from his ‘mistake’ of omitting the cross from his message in Athens.⁷¹ It is possible that Luke did not report on that part of the speech dealing with the cross, it being similar to what Paul had preached many times. It is also possible that the

⁶⁸Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts*, 24.

⁶⁹Charles, “Engaging the (Neo-)Pagan Mind” *Trinity Journal* 16:1 (Spring 1996): 62.

⁷⁰*St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen*, p. 252, as quoted in N.B. Stonehouse, *The Areopagus Address*, 32. In f.n. 34 Stonehouse mentions Foakes-Jackson, Finegan, and G.T. Purves as being of the same opinion as Ramsay.

⁷¹Bruce, *Commentary*, 1984, discounts this theory as having little to commend it, 365.

reaction to the mention of the resurrection caused Paul's speech to be interrupted before he could expound on the meaning of the cross. But even the message of the cross is "foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18), so if he had preached the cross first, the division between believers and sneerers may have occurred before he got to the resurrection. In any case, if every sermon resulted in a harvest of "a few men" and "others with them," the church would still grow very steadily.

Conclusions and Practical Implications

In every culture there are 'hooks' on which we may hang the gospel. In *Eternity in their Hearts*, Richardson gives us many examples of such 'hooks' in various cultures (ch.1-3). Paul used the story of the altar "to an unknown God" as his hook to establish the common ground with the Athenians and to gain their trust. Furthermore, he showed where bits of truth were to be found in their own literary heritage by quoting their poets. He linked what his audience knew with what he wanted to tell them and he did not mince words about the resurrection and the judgment to come. Paul's discourse "wraps universal truth in the language and idiom of the day, culminating in a uniquely Christian expression of biblical revelation, and inviting the listeners to a higher metaphysical ground."⁷² Here are worthwhile lessons to learn for those who seek to do cross-cultural evangelism, or any kind of evangelism. We need to bridge the gap between contemporary culture (including philosophy) and the revelation of God as given in the Bible. We need to speak the idiom of today and not use "churchy" language. All people live by something: some ideal or principle. Even those who are totally secularized have notions of fairness and justice by which they try to live. This could form a bridge to God's justice. Recent, New Age

⁷²Charles, "Engaging the (Neo-)Pagan Mind," 55.

type of interest in 'spirituality' may be used to arouse an interest in true spirituality. In all this, it is important to remember that it is the Holy Spirit who will precede our message and prepare those whose heart will be opened, like Lydia's (Acts 16:14).

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