

Athens: Do Philosophers Need Jesus?

Thomas Robinson, Cities of Hope 6, July 3, 2016

Acts 17:16-34 Paul Teaches in Athens while he Awaits Silas & Timothy

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was aroused in him as he saw the city was full of images of gods. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the **synagogue** with the **Jews** and the **God-revering Gentiles**, and in the **marketplace** every day with those who **happened to be there**.

¹⁸ Some of the **Epicurean** and **Stoic philosophers** also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this phrase-dropper wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of **foreign divinities**” (*daimonia*) – because he was announcing **Jesus** and the **Rising** (Resurrection/*Anastasis*).

¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the **Areopagus**, saying, “**Are we permitted to know** what this **new teaching** is that you are presenting? ²⁰ For you bring some startling things to our hearing, so we want to know what these things mean.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there spent their time in nothing else than in telling or hearing the newest thing.

Paul Speaks to Philosophers about God as Creator and Lord.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you reverence-all-divine-beings. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also a standing altar with this inscription, ‘**TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.**’ What therefore you **worship but do not know**, this I proclaim to you.

²⁴ The **God who made the cosmos and everything in it**, being **Lord of heaven and earth**, does **not live in temples made with hands**, ²⁵ nor is he **served by human hands**, as though he needed anything, since **he himself gives to all life and breath and everything**. ²⁶ And **he made from one every nation of humanity** to live on all the surface of the earth, having marked out ordered seasons and the limits of their dwelling, ²⁷ that **they should seek God**, if perhaps they might **feel after him and find him**, though actually he is not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for ‘*In him we live and move and exist*’ [Epimenides, 6th c. bc]; as even some of **your own poets** have said, ‘*For we are indeed his offspring*’ [Aratus 3rd c. bc, Cleanthes, 3rd c. bc].

²⁹ Since then **we are God’s offspring**, it is not appropriate for us to consider that the divine is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by human art and imagination. ³⁰ After overlooking the times of this lack of knowledge, **God is now giving instructions to people** – all of them, everywhere – **to change their way of thinking**. ³¹ This is because he has set a day on which he will bring just judgment to the human realm by a **man** whom he **marked out** through providing a **trustworthy sign** to all by causing him to **rise from the dead**.”

The Varied Responses of Athenians

³² Now when they heard of a **rising of dead people**, some mocked. But others said, “We will **hear you again about this**.” ³³ So **Paul went out** from their midst. ³⁴ But some men by staying in his company **came to faith**, among whom also were **Dionysius**, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named **Damaris**, and others with them.

Acts 14:15-17 Paul and Barnabas stop people in Lystra from worshipping them.

¹⁵ “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”

Paul in Athens – a View on the World

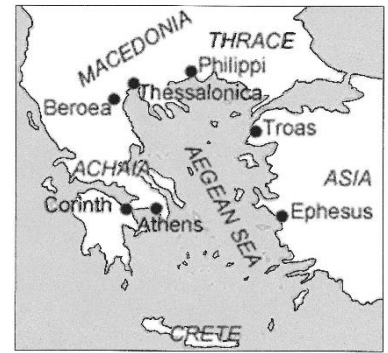
Paul has encountered the diaspora synagogue (Antioch), popular paganism (Lystra), Roman domination (Philippi). Now after Thessalonica and Berea, he comes to Athens, worried for the survival of the infant churches.

Athens, the most famous city in the Greek world, not big or powerful, but very influential, a university city with an unmatched cultural heritage.

Again he starts with the synagogue, where people know Israel's story, but he also goes to the famous Agora/plaza, with the open-air Stoa/colonnade, that gave Stoic philosophy its name.

Where popular philosophies, 'world-views,' were taught, debated, shaping shapers of culture.

Here he meets not persecution but puzzlement. He uses ideas people recognize, but puts them together in strange ways, a 'phrase-dropper.' He talks about Jesus and *Anastasis/Rising*.



Epicureans, Stoics, and the Areopagus

Athens was famous for philosophy: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, their schools. Epicurus an Athenian aristocrat founded the "Garden." Late 4th c. bc. Zeno from Cyprus started the Stoic school, early 3rd c. bc. Both had wide influence by Paul's time. Many Jews studied philosophy: Philo.

Epicurus: (like deism) If gods exist, they are far away and happy and not interested in us. We are only "atoms" and dissolve at death, nothing to fear. It is best to withdraw from difficulties of life & find imperturbability (*ataraxia*) in a quiet 'garden' with friends. Salvation from ignorance/fear!

Stoics: (like pantheism) We, like everything, are part of a single web of material being – nature (*physis*), guided from within by reason/*Logos* (Zeus?). No real evil. All is unchangeable, connected, cyclical. Don't fight it. Seek calm, freedom from passion (*apatheia*). Live according to nature.

Paul quotes a saying from two Stoics: Cleanthes, leader after Zeno, and Aratus, *Phaenomena*.

Areopagus: relic of an ancient law court. In its founding myth, recounted by playwright Aeschylus (*Epimenides*): Apollo tells the Areopagus: 'Once a man has died, there is no rising (*anastasis*).'

Paul faces an audience with a high self-opinion, strong and varied views, wide potential influence.

They wonder if this is some foreign mystery religion (with secrets) that might be illegal.

The God who Transcends, Creates, and Inhabits Creation

Athens was concerned both with ignorance and agnosticism. He starts from evidence of reverence (big word), shown in an agnostic altar. He has no secrets but wants to overcome real ignorance.

With every phrase, Paul interacts with their world views: affirming, reversing, modifying, focusing.

God (singular) transcends the cosmos and created it (a beginning, flow of time). He is Lord, caring about the creation. Not living in human temples or served by humans. He is always giver of life.

God is personal and passionate, not abstract reason. He is beyond creation but not withdrawn.

God in creation unites all humans in a single family (no barbarians), living out a real history that matters (not cyclical). Part of what unites humans is the desire to seek ultimate reality, God.

He is always close but knows that we can't reach him alone. He wants humans to feel for him in all their experiences in the hope of finding him. Greek poets expressed this well: ancient Epimenides and Stoics. We, as God's creatures, are part of God's family (God's image).

Just as creation moves from God to us, so knowledge of God must move from God to us. Not our creation, but God reaching out so as actually to be felt by us. He teaches us a new way of thinking by incarnation, a person and a sign: a man dying as one of us and Rising! A New World!

Passionate, fearless life with God! A lot to digest. Some scoff, others reflect, some come to faith.

The world looks very different. Here is the basis for love and service, struggle against evil, hope!