

The Apostle Paul in Athens: ‘An Unknown God,’ Pagan Poetry, and Christian Contextualization

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ABSTRACT: The apostle Paul’s visit to Athens was a key moment during his second missionary journey. In the Athenian Agora, Paul was drawn into a debate by a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who were confused by the apostle’s “babbling” about “foreign gods.” They brought Paul before a council of authorities assembled on the Areopagus to explain his teachings. He used the opportunity to critique traditional Greek religious practices and philosophy, and, in a remarkable early display of contextualization, recited “pagan poetry” to explain the Christian deity. This essay analyzes the rhetorical strategies, apologetics, and tactic of contextualization employed by Paul in his Areopagus speech.

KEYWORDS: Apostle Paul, Athens, Christian contextualization, Epicureanism, Stoicism

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I. INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul was a crucial figure in the first-century westward spread of the Christian faith, beyond its origins in the Roman province of Judaea to Asia Minor (modern Turkey), the Greek provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, and onward to the capital city of Rome itself. Paul was uniquely qualified for this missionary work, because, unlike the other apostles, he was a Roman citizen and he grew up in Tarsus in Cilicia (southeast Asia Minor), where he would have familiarized himself with both *Hellenic* and *Hellenistic* Greek culture and with the Koine Greek language (the *lingua franca* of the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire). The biblical book of Acts provides historical narratives of three missionary journeys Paul and his co-workers undertook (c. AD 46-48; 49-52; and 53-57), during which they visited major Greek urban centers, including Thessalonica, Corinth, and Athens (Acts 17:1-18:18; 20:1-6 NIV). This essay concerns Paul’s stay in Athens during his second missionary journey (fig. 1), a visit traditionally dated to c. 50 [1: 96].



Figure 1. The Second Missionary Journey of Paul.

Just before embarking on his second missionary journey in c. 49, Paul went to Jerusalem to visit the other apostles and resolve a dispute that had arisen among the Judeo-Christians living in Antioch, a principal city in the Syrian province of the Roman Empire. Some insisted male *Gentile* (or non-Jewish) converts to Christianity were required to be *circumcised* (a physical symbol of the spiritual covenant between God and

Abraham) and to follow certain laws of Judaism. Paul and his associate Barnabas disagreed and were sent from Antioch to Jerusalem to settle the matter with the other apostles and *elders* of the church [2]. At the ensuing “Council of Jerusalem,” a decisive moment for the early church [see 3: 25-39], Peter and the other apostles agreed with Paul that Gentile converts were generally exempt from Mosaic law (Acts 15:19-21). Encouraged by the council’s decision, Paul set off on a new missionary journey to share this news and the gospel with the Gentiles living in Asia Minor and Greece.

Paul was accompanied on his second missionary journey by a fellow evangelist named Silas. Like Paul, Silas was a Hellenistic Jew and also a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37). From Antioch, Paul and Silas first revisited the churches the apostle had established during his first missionary journey in Asia Minor. They travelled through the interior Asian provinces of Cilicia, Phrygia, and Galatia for several months, before finally reaching the city of Troas on the north-western coast of Asia Minor. In Troas, Paul had a vision “of a man of Macedonia [or northern Greece] standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’” (Acts 16:9-11). As a result of his vision, Paul sailed from Troas to the island of Samothrace then on to Neapolis (modern Kavala) on the northern Aegean coast. By this point, the apostle’s entourage apparently included Luke, the author of the book of Acts [Acts 16:10; regarding the relationship of Luke and Paul, see 4; 5; 6]. On landing at Neapolis, Paul set foot on European soil for the first time. Neapolis served as the primary seaport of the Roman colony of Philippi [7]. From the coast, the apostle and his companions hiked some fifteen kilometres inland over a mountain ridge to Philippi, where they stayed for “several days” (Acts 16:12). During this time, a “dealer in purple cloth” named Lydia, who was visiting Philippi from the Asian city of Thyatira, became the first known person to convert to the Christian faith in Europe (Acts 16:13-15).

From Philippi, Paul ventured onward to nearby Thessalonica, Macedonia’s capital that had a population in excess of 200,000, and then to Berea (or Beroea), a smaller city in southwestern Macedonia. Paul’s custom was to first visit the local synagogue when he entered a new city, to reason with the Jews “from the [Hebrew] Scriptures” (or *Old Testament*), before reaching out to local Gentiles (see Acts 17:2, 10). In both Thessalonica and Berea, Paul’s evangelistic message found receptive listeners; many “Jews were persuaded” to join Paul and Silas, as were “a large number of God-fearing” Greek women and men (Acts 17:4, 11-12). From Berea, Paul continued 30 kilometres southeast to the Aegean coast and boarded a boat that was sailing to Athens, in all likelihood taking the quicker and safer interior sea route between the large island of Euboea and the Greek mainland. The apostle then made a seemingly brief stop in Athens, which is the subject of the remainder of this essay. After his stay in Athens, Paul spent the rest of his time in Greece at the city-state of Corinth in the Peloponnese region, about 80 kilometres west of Athens. When he left Corinth Paul sailed on to Ephesus in Asia Minor, then to Caesarea (in modern Israel), then to Jerusalem to report on his activities (Acts 18:18-22).

II. PAUL IN ATHENS

In each Greek city the apostle Paul visited, his message was surely challenged by firmly entrenched and time-honoured local religious beliefs and practices, many of which were rooted in the Bronze Age (roughly 3000-1500 BC) or even earlier [8]. Twelve main deities composed the Greek pantheon. At the top sat Zeus, the sky god and father of other gods and goddesses (fig. 2). One of Zeus’ daughters, Athena was the patron goddess of the city of Athens. Sculptors often depicted Athena wearing a tall cylindrical headdress (πόλος transliteration pólos) and holding a goatskin shield (αἰγίς or aegis) (fig. 3). Her sanctuary, or sacred precinct (τέμενος or temenos), was the Athenian *Acropolis* and her temple was the famed Parthenon.

Historians have been inclined to view ancient Greek religion as a progression of stages during which “typically Greek” practices of the Classical Period (roughly 550-350 BC) were gradually left behind and succumbed to the foreign influences of the Hellenistic Period [see 9; 10]. While it is true Athens of the first century was a composite society, which joined the civilization of its Hellenic past with the cultures of the ancient Near East [11: 412], there was continuity in certain practices from the Classical Period until the time of the apostle Paul. For example, sacred objects were venerated in all Periods; for the Greeks, “the adoration of the [sculpted] image” was a constant [9: 16]. The evidence suggests though, that by the time of Paul, Greco-Romans tended to treat cultic statues as having a unique *ontology*, seeing their cultic statues [and sanctuaries and temples generally] as “bridge[s] between two worlds,” statues of deities stood at a “boundary between the world of the human and the visible, and the invisible world of “gods, spirits, and the dead” [12: 709, 719]. This concept brought Paul into conflict with the Athenians. The apostle’s conviction was that a (singular) God “made the world and everything in it,” and, furthermore, this God neither lived “in temples built by human hands” nor resembled a “gold or silver or stone” image that could be formed “by human design and skill” (Acts 17:24, 29).



Figure 2. Cultic statue of enthroned Zeus, c. 100 BC. Public Domain.



Figure 3. Roman copy of the Athenian cultic statue Athena Parthenos, c. AD 200. Public Domain.

As previously mentioned, Paul's routine when arriving in a new city was first to visit the Jewish community at the local synagogue, before reaching out to other residents. This is what he did in both Thessalonica and Berea. But when Paul arrived in Athens it appears that he paused to study its famous cityscape before going to the synagogue (Acts 17:16-17). Although by the first century AD, the ancient city-state had been surpassed by Rome both militarily and politically, Athens remained a cultural capital of the Mediterranean world, a focus of learning and philosophy, and an architectural treasure. Paul probably entered Athens via its port city of Piraeus. On passing the city gates he would have taken note of the ancient cemetery of Kerameikos (Κεραμεικός), where Pericles and Cleisthenes were interred. Further along, Paul would have come to the theater of Dionysus, the cultic center of the god of wine and fertility. Dionysus' theater was at the foot of the Acropolis, and from this vantage point Paul undoubtedly observed the Parthenon, the temple of *Athena Parthenos* (or "Athena the Virgin") and the various other temples devoted to various other deities. Luke took note that when Paul saw "the city was full of idols," he was "greatly distressed" (Acts 17:16). The Greek term translated "greatly distressed" (παροξύνω) could also be understood as "roused to anger." It is safe to assume that any admiration Athens' architecture may have inspired was then overcome by distress. Apparently, the apostle then went directly to the local synagogue to "reason" with the Jews and Greeks who were "God-fearing" (Acts 17:17). The term translated as "God-fearing" (σεβέω) means "devout" or "religious." These were likely Athenian Gentiles attracted to Judaism's moral and spiritual elements, but not observant of every ritual and ceremonial law.

When Paul was not reasoning with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the Athenian synagogue, he was preaching to anyone "who happened to be" in the "marketplace" (Acts 17:17). Athens' open space marketplace, known as the *Agora* (ἀγορᾶ), was a multi-function public gathering place where people from every social stratum—city officials, businesspeople, philosophers, loafers, and out-of-towners—congregated each day to buy and sell, hear the latest news, and exchange views on politics, social issues, and religion [13]. Luke wrote, "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time [in the Agora] doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21). This social environment presented Paul with an ideal setting to expound his gospel message and explain the new Christian faith to a general audience.

Luke did not record what Paul said in the Agora, but it is safe to assume he conveyed the same message he had earlier in Thessalonica and Berea. In Thessalonica, Paul used the Hebrew Scriptures to explain and prove "the *Messiah* had to suffer and rise from the dead" (Acts 17:3). The transliteration "Messiah" comes from a Hebrew term (מָשִׁיחַ), which means "the anointed." The English word Christ comes from the equivalent Greek term (Χριστός transliteration christos). Paul's message was that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah), that his death and resurrection were foreordained, and that all of this was God's divine plan. According to Luke, in Athens such bold assertions drew the attention of some local intellectuals:

"A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with [Paul]. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbling trying to say?' Others remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.' They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?'" (Acts 17:18-19).

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers disparagingly called the apostle a "babbling" (from the Greek σπερμολόγος transliteration spermologos). The original Greek term insinuates someone who hangs about in a

marketplace waiting to pick up merchandise or food that might fall from stalls or tables, a type of beggar or parasite. Some of the philosophers may have genuinely supposed Paul to be such a person, but they probably spoke metaphorically, intending to suggest Paul was a confused or amateur foreign philosopher who had cobbled together bits of “street philosophy” he had gathered from others in the marketplace [14: 571]. Whatever the case, referring to a person as a “babbling” reflected some degree of disdain. Before moving on to a consideration of the apostle Paul’s Areopagus speech, it is worthwhile to briefly consider whom the Epicureans and Stoics were, and what each group believed.

III. EPICUREANS AND STOICS

Ancient Greek philosophy rose to prominence in the sixth century BC, though its best-known phase was the Classical Period of the fifth and fourth centuries, which is inextricably linked to the contributions of a series of three well-known individuals: the Athenian moral philosopher Socrates (c. 470-399 BC) who taught in the Agora (as the apostle Paul would later do); Socrates’ student Plato (c. 425-348 BC); who founded his “Platonic Academy” just outside Athens; and Plato’s student Aristotle (384-322 BC), who established his own “Peripatetic school” at the Athenian temple known as the Lyceum [see 15]. Plato’s teachings were well-documented and preserved and had a tremendous impact in later centuries including during the Christian era, so much so the twentieth-century English intellectual Alfred North Whitehead famously asserted, “the European philosophical tradition ... consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” [16: 39]. During the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman eras, various other philosophical schools of thought vied for influence, including Pyrrhonism, numerous forms of Platonism and Neoplatonism, which were in part inspired by the teachings of Plato, and Scepticism (whose adherents often challenged the claims of both Plato and Aristotle). However, Paul’s gospel message was specifically disputed by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who espoused unique worldviews.

Epicureanism was (and is) a system of beliefs founded on the teachings of the ancient Athenian sage Epicurus (c. 341-270 BC) (fig. 6). This system of beliefs had a broad international impact for more than seven centuries, from Greece, to Asia Minor and Judaea, to Egypt and Roman Africa [see 17]. Epicurus’ philosophy emphasized the means of achieving happiness and the importance of cultivating the “inner life,” rather than the “external life of circumstance” [17: 31]. In this, there were fundamental similarities between Epicurean teachings and the Christian faith. In fact, the commonalities between the Christian worldview and Epicureanism were manifold: for example, each taught “a right understanding of the universe was necessary for a right understanding of man” [18: 374]. Furthermore, followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Epicureanism each stressed the key role played by the exercise of an individual’s *free will*. The Christian theologian and philosopher, Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150-215) thought the greatest insights of Epicurus and other Greek philosophers (including their emphasis on free will) had been plagiarized from Jewish teachings and were ultimately indebted to revelations of ancient Judaism [19: 282; see 20]. Whatever the case, numerous Christian *church fathers*, who collectively felt the pull of Greek philosophy and thought, expressed admiration for aspects of Epicurean philosophy, in each of Epicurus’ systematic divisions: sense-perceptions, physics, and ethics [19: 279].

However, on at least one fundamental issue, Christianity and Epicureanism could not have been more at odds. Epicurus dispensed with transcendent (*platonic*) ideas and forms, and he discounted the possibility of the soul’s survival after death. Although Epicurus and his followers did not entirely dismiss the possibility gods and goddesses existed, they did look with disapproval on the idea gods might punish humanity for its sins. For Epicurus, the precise nature of the gods was uncertain, and, in any case, they did not interest themselves in the affairs of ordinary people [21: 321-323]. Epicurus taught the anxiety caused by humanity’s fear of death and punishment “contaminated the blessings of life,” and led to “extreme and irrational desires” [22; see 18: 376]. Since death means very little, Epicurus explained, it should neither be feared nor looked forward to with anticipation. Since there is no prospect of a coming punishment and no prospect of coming eternal rewards, a person had every incentive to seek pleasure and enjoy the physical life he or she actually had. The apostle Paul’s Christian message, conversely, was centered wholly on the reality of immortality and on the ultimate destiny of the soul. Paul also taught that a person need not fear death, but for an entirely different reason: even though the prospect of eternal punishment was real, the Christian plan of salvation offered attainable heavenly rewards awaiting on the other side.

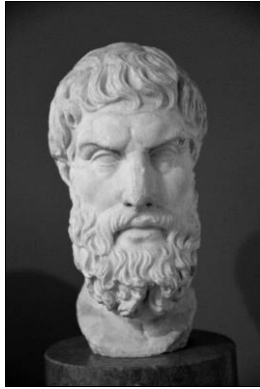


Figure 6. Head of Epicurus.
British Museum, London. Public Domain.

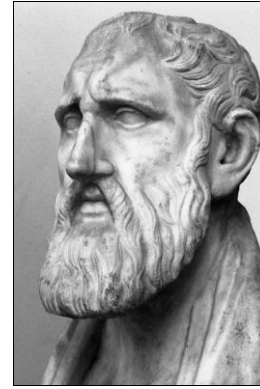


Figure 7. Bust of Zeno of Citium,
Farnese Collection, Naples. Public Domain.

The extensive writings of Epicurus and his disciples had a dogmatic character. Studying foundational Epicurean treatises provided relatively clear doctrines and applications. Stoicism, on the other hand, was more a general school of thought; it did not have a definitive dogma, a principal text, or a defining creed. Rather, Stoicism of the Hellenistic age and later was an “expression of an attitude of mind working upon the older and accepted dogmas of philosophy and common thought, seeking out its correlatives here and there in the thinking of the age” [23: 269]. At its core though, there was a consensus among Stoics that each individual possessed an ability to rise above their environment and experiences through the exercise of free will. The ultimate “goal” or “purpose” (τέλος transliteration *telos*) of a Stoic’s existence was to “flourish” or “live well” (from the Greek εὐδαιμονία transliteration *eudaimonia*). Happiness could be achieved by attaining harmony within oneself and by living in harmony with the world and with nature. Stoics viewed the world as a unity, akin to a great city. Each person had an obligation to contribute as an active citizen within the world city, to act with virtue, a sense of morality, and a devotion to justice. An advanced and healthy Stoic philosopher cultivated a level of *asceticism*, free from corrupting emotions and passions. While a Stoic individual might seem stern or to lack mercy, this was offset by the benevolence of divine nature. Over time, the “greater lights” of the school of Stoic philosophy turned to “mysticism, to a spiritual, though pantheistic, view of the universe and God and of man as related to both” [23: 270]. And since God (or in the Greek pantheon, the chief deity Zeus) was identified as the active and provident force of the universe, a “well-lived” life included conformity with the will of this chief administrator [24] and a general acceptance of fate/destiny (Εἱμαρμένη or *heimarmene*). Stoicism could not be fully synchronized with either Epicureanism, which accepted withdrawal from worldly affairs and emphasized individual pleasure, or with Christianity, and its intrinsic message that human understanding must give way to faith, to the intervention of an unseen and merciful God, and to the hope of personal salvation after death.

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the golden age of the evolutionary theories propounded by Charles Darwin (1809-1882) [see 25: 141-223], many physical and social scientists, and more than a few theologians, saw most anything through the interpretive lens of developmental evolution. For every phenomenon, so they said, there must be a less-developed antecedent. To some, first-century Christianity appeared so intertwined with the socio-cultural and intellectual developments of the Greco-Roman world, they assumed the former evolved out of the latter. There was support in ancient early Christian writings for this notion. Since the beginning of the Christian faith, certain theologians suggested a dependent relationship between Christianity and Stoic philosophy [see 26]. Indeed, during the lifetime of Saint Jerome (AD 347-420) forged letters circulated that purportedly had been exchanged between the apostle Paul and the Roman Stoic Seneca (c. 4 BC-AD 65). Church fathers and early church *apologists*, including Tertullian and Lactantius, wrote admiringly about Seneca and Epictetus. The effort to establish links between so-called *Pauline Christianity* and Stoicism carried on in later centuries in the writings of British historian Percy Gardner, German theologian Johannes Weiss, American professor Benjamin Wisner Bacon, and others. However, the perceived links seem tenuous, in part because Paul never acknowledged a debt to Stoicism, never mentioned Stoicism’s philosophical tenets, and was never recognized as a brother by any of the prominent Stoics of his day.

In spite of this, theologians and historians have still often singled out Stoicism as a “preparatory movement” to Christianity, particularly their supposed similarities regarding the concepts of “God” and of “Man” [27: 217]. As for the concept of God, some perceive Stoicism and Christianity as, in essence, similarly *monotheistic*. Both Judaism and Christianity though describe a supreme *being*, a real *entity* (rather than a conceptual absolute), who is nonetheless also immaterial and spiritual. Stoicism, alternatively, was less monotheistic than both *monistic* and *pantheistic*, in the sense that Zeus was accepted as a type of supreme being but was also the chief deity among many other deities. Also, Greek Stoics did not make the same distinction that Jews and Christians made between an *incorporeal* creator (God) and his *corporeal* creation (the world) and

humanity, which was created “in his own image” (Genesis 1:27). Stoics maintained the supreme being was “a corporeal entity” and “active principle” in the world, who could further be characterized as an “eternal reason” (*logos*) that resided in both the supreme being and in humanity [24]. This view that God and man are “identical,” that “man is God and God is man” [27: 219] was reflected in the teachings of Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus (c. AD 50-135), who wrote, “If our souls are so bound up with God and joined together with Him as being parts of His being, does not God perceive their every motion as being a motion of that which is his own and of one body with Himself?” (see discourse 1.14).

The apostle Paul did not share this Stoic concept of divinity, and undoubtedly when he spoke in the Athenian Agora, he explained how his beliefs and those of other Christians diverged from those of Stoics, Epicureans, and from Greek philosophy and religion generally.

IV. THE AREOPAGUS SPEECH

Paul’s statements in the Agora seemed to endorse a “foreign god,” a god that did not belong to the recognized historical Greek pantheon, thus he was brought to a meeting of the *Areopagus* to explain. The term Areopagus (Ἀρειοσιβήτης) means “the Hill of Ares.” Ares was the Greek god of war, or perhaps more precisely the spirit or courage of battle. His Roman equivalent was Mars. According to Greek mythology, Ares and the eldest daughter of the Athenian king Cecrops (Aglaurus), had a daughter named Alcippe. Alcippe was raped by Halirrhothius, the son of the sea god Poseidon. Ares avenged this act and killed Halirrhothius. The other gods then formed a tribunal (the original “Council of the Areopagus”), put Ares on trial, and acquitted him of the killing. The great Athenian dramatist Aeschylus (born c. 525), in his tragic cycle *The Eumenides* (c. 458), wrote specifically the goddess Athena founded the tribunal that heard Ares’ case [see 28]. The hill on which Ares’ trial was said to have taken place, just northwest of the famed Acropolis (fig. 8), was later designated the Areopagus. The Italian Renaissance painter, Raphael (1483-1520) produced an imaginative image representing Paul’s Areopagus speech (fig. 9).



Figure 8. The Areopagus in modern Athens, 2023. Public Domain.

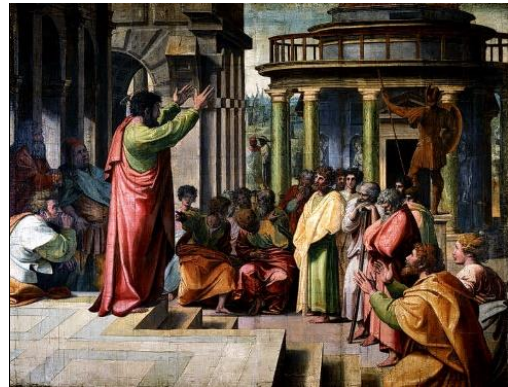


Figure 9. Raphael, *St. Paul Preaching in Athens*, 1515. Public Domain.

Following the Classical Period, trials and hearings were conducted on the same hill, presided over by a (mortal) Council of the Areopagus [29: 288]. The Council’s judges were known as *Areopagites*. The Areopagites of the first century AD were respected elder statesmen and each would have been a former *archon*, or chief Athenian magistrate. Although in earlier days, the Council exercised broad criminal and civil jurisdiction, by the time of the apostle Paul its role was more limited, but still included censorial control over religious matters and the morals of Athenian society. This was the proper tribunal to hear the apostle Paul’s unorthodox new teachings.

Paul was unlike other apostles, such as Peter and John, who were simple fisherman from the provincial region of Galilee. Presumably, Peter and John received only a limited formal education [30]; and in the writings of Luke, they are described as “unschooled, ordinary men” (Acts 4:13). However, even though they had not attended rabbinic school and held no official positions within religious circles, they nonetheless spoke with power and authority.

In contrast, Paul would have been considered both erudite (in the Jewish-theological sense) and cosmopolitan. Paul grew up in Tarsus, in the Roman province of Cilicia (in modern Turkey), where he would have learned the Greek language and been exposed to Greek ideas and philosophy. Paul’s ability to write in Greek was a rarity among first century Jews and indicated his advanced literacy training [30: 809]. Tarsus was a center of Stoicism, arguably the foremost school of (non-Christian) moral thought, and Paul had opportunities to hear its practical, popular form on the streets and in the markets of his hometown. And as he travelled the eastern Mediterranean world, he certainly came into daily contact with Stoic moral philosophy. Paul also

completed Judaic rabbinic religious studies with the strict Pharisee Gamaliel in Jerusalem, and had the scribal-literate authority of a Pharisee to teach in synagogues. When he appeared before the Council of the Areopagus, Paul was prepared to make an educated and well-organized statement.

The apostle presented an unknown theistic view of the universe to his Athenian audience, but he followed the conventions of an Athenian orator and employed the techniques of formal *rhetoric*, the art of persuasive oral communication. Paul used the same rhetorical methods described by Aristotle in his fourth century BC treatise *Rhetorica* (Ῥητορικὴ). The apostle's speech: 1. offered an *exordium* and *narratio* (an introduction and narrative account of what had happened) (verses 17:22-23a); 2. presented a *propositio* and *partitio* (claim/stance and argument) (verses 17:23b-27); 3. supplied *confirmatio* (positive proofs of his argument) (verses 17:28-29); and 4. concluded with a *peroratio* (a call to action) (verses 17:30-31). The Athenian philosophers and Areopagites' reliance upon the human authority of reason and their encouragement of debate allowed Paul to systematically set out key principles of the Christian faith and to publicly argue against the Athenians own religious practices [31: 24]. And the public forum also suited Paul's disposition and abilities. As a trained debater and apologist, he felt comfortable arguing, "disputing," and "reasoning" in furtherance of his faith in the synagogues and on the streets (Acts 17:17). It must be noted though, as an aside, Paul's impressively concise statement may in fact be Luke's summary of a much longer one [32: 185]. Luke documented less than three hundred words, which can be spoken in two or three minutes, and it is easy to imagine this was a condensed version of a longer address.

The remainder of the essay will focus primarily on Paul's *confirmatio* (Acts 17:28-29), where the apostle references the authority of surprising sources, namely non-Christian poetry, as positive proof of his Christian claims. But first it is worthwhile to spend a little time considering the other rhetorical methods he utilized.

V. AN ANONYMOUS ALTAR

Paul was a newcomer to Athens and had been placed 'on the defensive,' so he introduced his speech with a brief and ostensibly complimentary narrative (his *exordium* and *narratio*), intending perhaps to appeal to his audience's interests and vanity. "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god" (Acts 17:22-23a). He acknowledged being initially impressed by one specific aspect of the city, that its residents were so very "religious." Standing on the Areopagus, the apostle Paul and the Athenian philosophers had an ideal unobstructed view of the nearby Acropolis (fig. 10), a quintessential symbol of the religions of ancient Greece. As Paul spoke to the philosophers, the temples, altars, and votives of the Acropolis served as their backdrop. The apostle's words surely echoed off the walls of the Parthenon, the temple that was home to Pheidias' enormous gold and ivory cult image of Athena Parthenos, Athens' patron-goddess.



Figure 10. Contemporary view of the Acropolis from the Areopagus. Public Domain.

In addition to Zeus, Athena, and the rest of the Greek pantheon (the so-called "Twelve Olympians"), Athenians worshipped many lesser deities and even paid homage to "the unknown god" (Ἄγνωστος Θεός transliteration agnostos theos). Many ancient literary and epigraphic sources verify the existence of altars in Athens and other Greek locations dedicated to "unknown gods" (see Pausanias 1.1.4; 5.14.8; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 1.110; 33: 187-220) (for example, figs. 11, 12). Such altars reflected a commonly-held belief that if gods and goddesses (even unknown ones) were not afforded proper respect then dire consequences might follow or benevolent gifts might be withheld [34: 82-83]. In ancient Greece the relationship between gods and humans was based upon "exchange," deities watched over the welfare of humanity and people brought votive offerings to sanctuaries in gratitude [8].



Figures 11, 12. Altar to the “unknown god,”
c. 100 BC. Palatine Museum, Rome. Public Domain.

Paul’s Aeropagus speech began with an apparent commendation: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.” However, the Greek phrase translated as “are very religious” (δεισιδαίμων transliteration *deisidaimōn*) derives from root words meaning “fearful [of the] devil,” and is better understood as “superstitious” than devout or pious. Within the context of his entire speech, Paul’s clear implication was the Athenians held false beliefs, including the belief their pantheon and even “unknown gods” required placation or should be (literally or figuratively) idolized [see, generally, 35]. What Paul essentially meant was, ‘you are too superstitious’ and ‘your polytheistic beliefs are false.’

Many of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers listening to Paul would have undoubtedly agreed that Athenians tended to be too superstitious. The Epicureans, in particular, were “stereotypically the primary critics of superstitious religion” [36: 74-75; 14: 577]. Epicureans studied the natural world extensively, in part to dispel irrational fears that nature was controlled by Greco-Roman gods and goddesses. The Roman Epicurean philosopher and poet, Lucretius (c. 99-55 BC), for instance, chastised those who practiced idolatry in the superstitious belief that the pantheon used natural forces like sun and rain, or lightning and hail, to reward or punish humanity. Lucretius wrote,

“O hapless race of men, when that they charged the gods with such acts and coupled with them bitter wrath! What groanings did they then beget for themselves, what wounds for us, what tears for our children’s children! No act is it of piety to be often seen with veiled head to turn to a stone and approach every altar and fall prostrate on the ground and spread out the palms before the statues of the gods and sprinkle the altars with much blood of beasts and link vow to vow” [37: 76].

While Stoics accepted the Greco-Roman pantheon, they also generally spurned irrational fears of the unknown and false conceptions of the causation of natural phenomena. Both Zeno of Citium (c. 334-262 BC) (fig. 7), the Hellenistic founder of Stoicism, and the prominent Roman Stoic Seneca thought it unnecessary to bring offerings to designated altars or elaborate temples to placate the wrath or to curry the favor of gods and goddesses, because, they believed the entire cosmos and all of humanity was already permeated with the presence of an intelligent entity, Zeus [14: 577]. According to the Stoic worldview, the supreme entity’s “divine actions” were not “random and unpredictable,” like most gods of Greek mythology, rather Stoics believed in an “orderly and rational” divine being, who was inclined to act providentially toward humanity [24]. Stoic philosopher Epictetus wrote that humans possess a fragment of God. “Do you think that I mean some God of silver or of gold, and external? You carry him within yourself” [38]. Still, Stoics conceived of God (or Zeus) as having a tangible aspect and manifestation; the materiality of the world emanated from the inner-worldly might and action of the Greek deity. The stagnant, unmoving temples, cultic statues, and altars devoted to the deity though, stood in stark contrast to Zeus himself, who was an active, dynamic force in nature and in the affairs of humanity. In his Aeropagus speech, the apostle Paul described a similar deity, who was not constrained or confined by “temples built by human hands,” but acted as a dynamic spiritual force, making “the world and everything in it,” and giving “life and breath” to all things (Acts 17:24-25).

The altar inscribed “to an unknown god” was a tangible acknowledgement a deity existed whom the Athenians did not understand, and this acknowledgment acted as a support or *point d’appui* for Paul’s following argument. After his opening exordium and narratio, the apostle moved on to the heart of his claims.

“So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:23b-25).

The philosophers listening to Paul would have objected on many grounds. Stoics thought the cosmos went through an endless cycle or progression of periods of conflagration (fire) and order; they did not share the Judaic or Christian belief in a singular and transcendent personal deity who created “the world and everything in it,” a concept that is conveyed from the beginning of the Hebrew Bible and the account of creation (Genesis 1-2). Paul explained such a transcendent deity could not be confined to man-made structures. The Hebrew Scriptures expressed this idea as well. The book of Kings tells that when King Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, he asked, “Will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). Many decades later, the Jewish prophet Isaiah speaking poetically on behalf of God proclaimed, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? ... Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?” (Isaiah 66:1-2). And Paul had been present when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death, and he heard Stephen profess, “The Most High does not live in houses made by human hands” (Acts 7:48). As Paul stood on the Areopagus and described to the Athenian philosophers a God who dwelled entirely outside of man-made temples, they had the Parthenon and Athens’ other magnificent temples within their view. The apostle’s words implicitly denounced the Athenians’ need for these sanctuaries, and that was a message that could not have been well received.

Epicureans in attendance certainly also bristled at Paul’s next assertion: “From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:26-27). The claim an unseen, previously unknown god had from one man “made all the nations,” both Athenians and barbarians, Greeks and Jews, and predetermined each society’s appointed “time in history” and the extent of their lands went against the teachings of Epicurus. Epicurus taught about the fundamental role random chance plays in the lives of individuals and in the course of human affairs, and he “strenuously resisted the idea that the world is the outcome of any design or serves any end” [39: 160].

VI. PAGAN POETRY

Perhaps sensing his words were in danger of being wholly rejected as nothing more than “babbling” about “foreign gods,” and to help convince his Greek audience of the veracity of his claims, Paul then did something remarkable that surely shocked his sophisticated listeners. He provided support (or confirmatio) for his assertions by quoting from his Greek listeners’ own revered poets: Paul said,

“From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. *‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’* As some of your own poets have said, *‘We are his offspring’* [emphasis added]. 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 human design and skill” (Acts 17:26-29).

The two emphasized phrases, respectively, referenced pagan poetry written by the Cretan philosopher Epimenides of Knossos (who lived in the 6th century BC) and the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus (c. 315-240 BC) (figs. 13, 14).

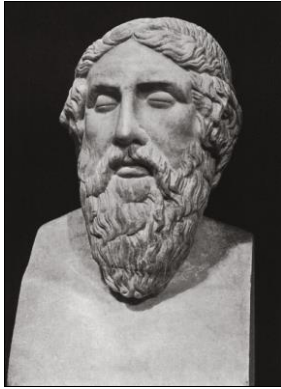


Figure 13. Herm of Epimenides.
Vatican Museums, Rome. Public Domain.

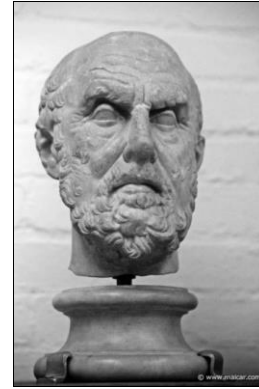


Figure 14. Head of Aratus.
British Museum, London. Public Domain.

Please note, the word “pagan” derives from the late Latin term *paganus*, meaning generally “an outsider.” Christians living in large urban centers during the late Roman Empire used the term pejoratively to describe people living in the countryside who continued to practice polytheism after the ascendancy of Christianity in the cities. Such “country dwellers” were considered unsophisticated and unrefined *bumpkins* [40: 625]. However, neither the apostle Paul nor the Athenians of the first century would have been familiar with this sense of the term pagan, and it is not used in this essay disparagingly, but rather purely for its alliterative value (“pagan poetry,” i.e., non-Christian poetry).

Epimenides of Knossos was a Greek seer and poet from the island of Crete, whose life story has long been blended with myth. It was said Epimenides had the gift of prophecy and was given authority to speak on behalf of Zeus, the Greek deity who ruled over Mount Olympus. Though Epimenides was apparently a prolific writer, his original prose and poems have been lost. In Acts 17:28, when the apostle Paul says, “For in him we live and move and have our being,” he quoted a mystical poetic work by Epimenides entitled “Cretica” (Κρητικά). A later source for the original wording of Epimenides’ poem is a Syriac manuscript commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, attributed to Isho’dad of Merv, a ninth century AD Nestorian Christian bishop who lived in the city of Hdatia (modern Iraq). Isho’dad’s manuscript contains a passage from “Cretica,” in which Epimenides gives voice to King Minos, the legendary ruler of Crete and the son of Zeus and Europa. In the passage, Minos offers a *panegyric* (a type of elegy) over what was supposed to be the burial plot of his father. Addressing Zeus, Minos ridicules a widely held Cretan belief that Zeus was a mere mortal and he could die. An English translation of Epimenides’ verses reads,

“They fashioned a tomb for you, holy and high one [Zeus],
Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies.
But you are not dead: you live and abide forever,
For in you we live and move and have our being” (Harris 1906).

As an aside, Paul also cited Epimenides’ “Cretica” in the *epistle* (or letter) the apostle wrote to his co-worker Titus, who was overseeing a new Christian congregation on the island of Crete. In the first chapter of Titus, Paul warns his co-worker, “there are many rebellious people [among the new congregation], full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain” (Titus 1:10-11). Then, Paul adds, “One of Crete’s own prophets [Epimenides] has said it: ‘*Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons*’ [emphasis added]. This saying is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the merely human commands of those who reject the truth” (Titus 1:12-14). In reference to Titus 1:12, the early Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria wrote, “You see how even to the prophets of the Greeks [Paul] attributes something of the truth, and is not ashamed, when discoursing for the edification of some and the shaming of others, to make use of Greek poems.”

In his letter to Titus, the apostle Paul expressed his concurrence with Epimenides’ opinion of Cretans, and in his Areopagus speech, the apostle cleverly called out correspondences between basic Christian principles and Greek philosophical tools (that is, mythological poetry) to appeal to and resonate with Hellenic and Hellenistic religious sentiments [14: 575-576]. Paul used the opportunity of addressing a group of Athenian philosophers to elucidate, on a *metaphysical* level, what the Christian deity is *like*. He is present everywhere, an infinite spirit, and can accept reverence and dispense mercies everywhere, not only through manmade temples and altars. Appealing to the Stoic concept that God pervades humanity, Paul argued it was unsound to suppose

human art or the human imagination could properly represent divinity with metal or stone, because the spiritual facet of humanity “already properly embodies the image of God and, hence *metaphysical representation* of God” [41: 630]. Thus, Paul utilized Hellenic and Hellenistic philosophical concepts within the context of Judeo-Christian apologetics to censure the “false divinity” of the Greek pantheon and concretized, artistic (mis)representations of the Greek gods’ supposed power [41: 631]. His intent was seemingly two-fold: 1. to explain inconsistencies between Christianity and Greco-Roman religiosity; and 2. to suggest that by extracting idolatry yet still incorporating the best features of Greco-Roman philosophical sensibilities, Christianity offered a “superior” worldview [14: 568].

Of course, Paul was reading into Epimenides’ poetic lines new meanings and connotations that went beyond anything that could have been in the mind of the earlier poet [32: 185]. In Paul’s estimation, Epimenides’ words could be understood to mean God’s providence produced and prolongs human life, his providence motivates or moves the body and soul, and affords humanity a special character and awareness, capable of knowing and emulating his divine nature. After quoting Epimenides (Acts 17:28a), Paul continued elucidating the qualities of the Christian God while simultaneously accentuating Epimenides’ key ideas. The apostle explained Epimenides’ verse, “in [God] we live and move and have our being,” with another Greek verse, [because] “we are [God’s] offspring” (Acts 17:28b).

The phrase “we are his offspring” is usually attributed to a poem (or versified treatise) entitled “Phaenomena” (Φαινόμενα translated, roughly, as “appearances”), which was written by Aratus, a student of the founder of Stoic philosophy, Zeno of Citium. Aratus’ popular poem vividly describes the celestial sphere and constellations, and it was commented upon and translated by numerous Hellenistic and Latin poets, including Theocritus, Ovid, Virgil, and Cicero. It must be noted though that Cleanthes of Assos (c. 330-230 BC), who succeeded Zeno as head of the Stoic school, wrote a poem entitled “Hymn to Zeus,” which also includes a verse translated “for we are your offspring” [42: 362]. One classical scholar has suggested “we are your offspring” may have been a Stoic “stock phrase” [32: 193]. Whatever the case, Paul apparently was quoting from the first lines of Aratus’ poem:

“From Zeus let us begin; him do we mortals never leave unnamed;
full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men;
full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus.
For *we are also his offspring* [emphasis added]; and he in his
kindness unto men giveth favourable signs and wakened the people to work ...” [43: 207].

Paul borrowed Aratus’ phrase to support an idea found in the Hebrew Bible and a basic tenet of the new Christian faith, that men and women were created “in the image of God” (Hebrew $\text{בְּצֶלְמֵתּוֹ} \text{ וּבְדִמְיוֹתּוֹ}$ Greek $\text{εἰκὼν} \text{ θεοῦ}$ Latin *Imago Dei*). This idea appears at the very beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures, in the account of creation: “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). The terms found in both the Hebrew Old Testament and later Greek New Testament translated into English as “image” and “likeness” are synonymous (see Genesis 5:1; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; Colossians 3:10; James 3:9). When Paul quoted Aratus, “we are [God’s] offspring,” his implication was all of humanity is uniquely created to function in God’s likeness and should be differentiated from forms that were not so created. Paul queried, if, as Aratus suggested, among all creation humanity is God’s unique spiritual offspring, how can God be adequately represented by common nonspiritual materials? God made humanity and made humanity’s home; therefore, he “does not live in temples made by human hands [like the Parthenon] and “he is not “an image made by human design and skill” [like the Athena Parthenos] (Acts 17:24, 29).

What made Paul’s Areopagus speech so extraordinary was not its theological content; he had already spoken on these matters many times, in Damascus, Jerusalem, the island of Cyprus, Asia Minor, and in other areas of Greece (Acts 9:22; 28; 13:4-14:28; 16:11-17:15). What made the Athenian sermon truly extraordinary was that the apostle tailored his message to the preferences of the Greek philosophers, explaining the Christian God in a way they already understood and could relate to. He used familiar pagan poetry to *contextualize* his gospel message.

VII. CHRISTIAN CONTEXTUALIZATION

Contextualization can be an effective educational tool that assists in explaining information or new ideas by situating them within more recognizable or broader settings. Christian evangelists and missionaries often customize their lessons by referencing local traditions and norms to improve understanding and encourage acceptance [44: 232-233]. Theologian and scholar, Byang H. Kato defined contextualization as “making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation [and] in reference to Christian practices ... an effort to express the never changing Word of God in ever changing modes of relevance” [45: 1217]. Repositioning a notion that

may seem revolutionary and undesirable within a more familiar established belief system discourages people from simply rejecting that notion.

In his pioneering missionary work, the apostle Paul set a standard for adapting to new socio-cultural settings and the “inculturation” of Christian principles [46: 37]. Toward the end of his third missionary journey, in his first Epistle to the church in Corinth, Paul explained his rationale:

“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law [of Moses] I became like one under the law ... so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law [including the philosophers of Athens] I became like one not having the law ... so as to win those not having the law. ... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Corinthians 9:20, 22-23).

To reach Gentiles, such as the Athenian philosophers, Paul lived outside the bounds of certain Jewish laws and intentionally conformed to Gentile expectations, adapting his lifestyle and cultural references to communicate and interact with his “target audience” more successfully [47: 117]. Poetry provided an ideal medium through which to distil essential themes of the Christian faith for a Greek audience; in part, because of the rich (though, of course, distinct) poetic legacies of Christians and Greeks. The celebrated literature of Greece originated with the religious and mythological poems of the Archaic Period (c. 800-500 BC), and the epic poems of Homer, ran onward through the Classical tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, and continued into the time of Paul. Greeks shared a special appreciation for poetry’s concentrated, imaginative language and its unique ability to elicit strong emotions and raise awareness. Paul’s decision to recite poetry within an Athenian religious discussion was well-reasoned, and an instructive early example of contextualization.

In addition, there can be little doubt the apostle felt quite comfortable reciting poetry. By conservative estimates, at least one-third of the entire Old Testament qualifies as poetry, or versifications of other genres, such as liturgical songs, *Wisdom literature*, and prophecy [see, generally, 48]. Indeed, the Bible’s first poetry appears in its very first chapter (Genesis 1:27). Just as the apostle Paul borrowed Greek poems to advance his missionary goal, Old Testament authors apparently also borrowed from the literature of other cultures to accomplish their goals. For example, certain scholars have claimed to discern connections between the Hebrew book of Psalms and poetry written in the ancient Egyptian and Semitic Ugaritic languages, and a greater consensus has emerged that certain poetic couplets, songs, and proverbs in the Bible may have been borrowed from Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature [47; 49; 50: 257-261, 372-373; 51; 52]. Many theologians and scholars, however, share the belief that such borrowing does not affect the Bible’s divine inspiration. One such biblical scholar has written, “All truth is God’s truth, wherever it may be found.” If an Old Testament writer borrowed “proverbs, songs, poetic couplets and other cultural *forms*, [they were] then reinterpreted and given authority and meaning by the biblical authors, all under divine direction” [47: 122]. This was Paul’s practice in Athens, borrowing and transforming an “existing pagan ... cultural form,” and introducing newer inner meanings [53: 214, 218].

Religious contextualization often involves translating themes into verbal and expressive forms that are particularly relevant within a given culture. The apostle Paul would have been familiar with this method from studying the Hebrew Scriptures, which tell of numerous incidents in which Gentile belief systems were employed to teach about the nature and desires of the God of Israel. Various prophets, writers, and spokesmen of the Old Testament borrowed concepts and argumentative methods from their various audiences’ religious and cultural milieus, repurposing existing worldviews for new ends [47; 51; 54]. While some Christian theologians, concerned “to protect the fully divine nature of Scripture,” struggle to reconcile discernible Ancient Near Eastern or Hellenistic (i.e., “pagan”) cultural forms in biblical passages, other theologians contend “the inclusion of pagan cultural forms within God’s inerrant Word is ... purposeful, a strategic decision of the Holy Spirit working through the human authors of Scripture. [The latter group maintain] *forms* have been recruited, ... to serve the divine *purpose* of truth communication” [47: 118].

VIII. CONCLUSION

The apostle Paul cited familiar Greek poetry both to make his message clearer and as “proof that humanity is related to God” [14: 584]. In the centuries immediately following the life of Paul, the early Christian apologists and philosophers Justin Martyr (c. AD 100-165) and Clement of Alexandria, as well as the Christian historian Eusebius (c. 260-339), endorsed the practice of borrowing non-Christian symbols and other forms of communication to spread the gospel, in the belief that since the God of the Bible is “the Lord of all history ... He was active in pagan cultures as well, preparing the way for them to receive the gospel someday” [55: unpaginated]. Many centuries later, the English intellectual and Christian poet, John Milton (1608-1674) also expressed approval for Paul’s sophisticated cultural apologetics, noting the apostle “thought it no

defilement to insert into Holy Scripture the sentences of three Greek poets and one of them a Tragedian [Milton was probably referencing Epimenides]" [56: 10; see also 31: 24]. For these later commentators, Paul's commendable ends certainly justified his unorthodox means.

People whom the apostle met when he ventured into the Greek provinces shared a culture of popularized philosophy. The language of the various schools of philosophy had entered the language of daily life in Athens, and the most profound insights of Hellenic philosophy often took a poetic form. Though Paul came to Athens to preach the gospel, he astutely elected not to dismiss the Athenian philosophers' own ideas entirely. Instead, he pointed out that they shared a common fundamental belief: as Epimenides and Aratus had correctly observed, "in [the supreme deity] we live and move and have our being," and "we are his offspring." Through Greek poetry Paul effectively communicated Christian theology to the Athenian philosophers gathered on the Areopagus.

But his speech did not end there. Paul had begun by describing the Athenians as "very religious" as evidenced by their altar to "an unknown god" (his exordium and narratio). He had then made his central claim and argument that God does not "live in temples built by human hands" (his propositio and partitio). He had then offered the positive proofs of Epimenides and Aratus' poetic verses (his confirmatio). Paul then concluded his Areopagus sermon with a call to action (his peroratio):

"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 human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:29-31).

In an ironic twist, the foreign "babbler" now became the teacher of Athens' scholarly philosophers. Paul instructed the philosophers (and everyone else listening) to put aside their "ignorance," and to repent of their pantheistic idolatry. He advised his listeners to put an end to their reliance both on human learning and on unfounded superstitions, and act more wisely. Paul's conclusion was blunt, and without equivocation. He declared the Athenians' material religiosity—manifested by their abundant temples, cultic statues and practices—betrayed their tragic obliviousness to "the unknown god" whom Paul avowed, and it was now time to repent and prepare for the Day of Judgment.

Surely, the apostle did not expect that his frontal assault on centuries of religious practice, his rejection of Athens' dazzling architectural and sculptural heritage, and his general denunciation of Stoic and Epicurean philosophy would result in wholesale acceptance and mass conversion. Luke wrote, when Paul brought up the topic of resurrection some in his audience "sneered" (perhaps the Epicureans), but some wanted to hear more (perhaps the Stoics). At least two individuals who apparently heard the apostle's speech on the Areopagus eventually came to believe his message. One is described as "a member of the Areopagus" named Dionysius (indicating at least one of Paul's judges had become his follower); the other was a woman named Damaris. Little is known about Damaris, but the historian Eusebius wrote that Dionysius later became a bishop of the new Christian community in Athens, and, according to church tradition, Dionysius was eventually martyred during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian [see 57]. The Scriptures suggest more people converted to Christianity in other Greek cities Paul visited (Acts 17:4, 12; 18:8), but the conversions of Dionysius and Damaris ensured the apostle's innovative efforts in Athens had not been completely in vain.

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