
PAUL IN ATHENS

(ACTS 17:16-34)

Version: 19 May 2004; 13 May 2015; 14 November 2020

STUDIES

Barclay, William. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Rev. ed. The Daily Study Bible. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976.

Haenchen, Ernst. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*. Translated from 14th German edition of 1965 by Bernard Noble and Gerald Shinn, with revised translation by R. McL. Wilson. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971. ISBN 0-664-20919-X.

PHOTO AT THE AREOPAGUS, 30 MAY 2014



TEXT

Paul in Athens.* ¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he grew exasperated at the sight of the city full of idols. ¹⁷ So he debated in the synagogue with the Jews and with the worshipers, and daily in the public square with whoever happened to be there. ¹⁸ Even some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers* engaged him in discussion. Some

* Paul's presence in Athens sets the stage for the great discourse before a Gentile audience in Acts 17:22–31. Although Athens was a politically insignificant city at this period, it still lived on the glories of its past and represented the center of Greek culture. The setting describes the conflict between Christian preaching and Hellenistic philosophy.

* *Epicurean and Stoic philosophers*: for the followers of Epicurus (342–271 B.C.), the goal of life was happiness attained through sober reasoning and the searching out of motives for all choice and avoidance. The Stoics were followers of Zeno, a younger contemporary of Alexander the Great. Zeno and his followers believed in a type of pantheism that held that the spark of divinity was present in all reality and that, in order to be free, each person must live “according to nature.” *This scavenger*: literally, “seed-picker,” as of a bird that picks up grain. The word is later used of scrap collectors and of people who take other people’s ideas and propagate them as if they were their own. *Promoter of foreign deities*: according to Xenophon, Socrates was accused of promoting new deities. The accusation against Paul echoes the charge against Socrates. *‘Jesus’ and ‘Resurrection’*: the Athenians are presented as misunderstanding Paul from the outset; they think he is preaching about Jesus and a goddess named *Anastasis*, i.e., Resurrection.

asked, “What is this scavenger trying to say?” Others said, “He sounds like a promoter of foreign deities,” because he was preaching about ‘Jesus’ and ‘Resurrection.’¹⁹ They took him and led him to the Areopagus* and said, “May we learn what this new teaching is that you speak of?”²⁰ For you bring some strange notions to our ears; we should like to know what these things mean.”²¹ Now all the Athenians as well as the foreigners residing there used their time for nothing else but telling or hearing something new.

Paul’s Speech at the Areopagus.²² Then Paul stood up at the Areopagus and said:*

“You Athenians, I see that in every respect you are very religious.²³ For as I walked around looking carefully at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, ‘To an Unknown God.’* What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you.²⁴ The God who made the world and all that is in it, the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands,^h²⁵ nor is he served by human hands because he needs anything. Rather it is he who gives to everyone life and breath and everything.²⁶ He made from one* the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions,²⁷ so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far

* *To the Areopagus*: the “Areopagus” refers either to the Hill of Ares west of the Acropolis or to the Council of Athens, which at one time met on the hill but which at this time assembled in the Royal Colonnade (*Stoa Basileios*).

§ 1 Cor 1:22.

* **In Paul’s appearance at the Areopagus he preaches his climactic speech to Gentiles in the cultural center of the ancient world. The speech is more theological than christological. Paul’s discourse appeals to the Greek world’s belief in divinity as responsible for the origin and existence of the universe.** It contests the common belief in a multiplicity of gods supposedly exerting their powers through their images. It acknowledges that the attempt to find God is a constant human endeavor. It declares, further, that God is the judge of the human race, that the time of the judgment has been determined, and that it will be executed through a man whom God raised from the dead. **The speech reflects sympathy with pagan religiosity, handles the subject of idol worship gently, and appeals for a new examination of divinity, not from the standpoint of creation but from the standpoint of judgment.**

* *‘To an Unknown God’*: ancient authors such as Pausanias, Philostratus, and Tertullian speak of Athenian altars with no specific dedication as altars of “unknown gods” or “nameless altars.”

^h 7:48–50; Gn 1:1; 1 Kgs 8:27; Is 42:5.

* *From one*: many manuscripts read “from one blood.” *Fixed ... seasons*: or “fixed limits to the epochs.”

from any one of us.ⁱ ²⁸ For ‘In him we live and move and have our being,’* as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ ²⁹ Since therefore we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divinity is like an image fashioned from gold, silver, or stone by human art and imagination.^j ³⁰ God has overlooked the times of ignorance, but now he demands that all people everywhere repent ³¹ because he has established a day on which he will ‘judge the world with justice’ through a man he has appointed, and he has provided confirmation for all by raising him from the dead.”^k

³² When they heard about resurrection of the dead, some began to scoff, but others said, “We should like to hear you on this some other time.” ³³ And so Paul left them. ³⁴ But some did join him, and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Court of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. ¹

Paul at Athens (verses 16-34)

16 Ἐν δὲ ταῖς Ἀθήναις ἐκδεχομένου αὐτοῦ τοῦ Παύλου παρωξύνετο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ θεωροῦντος κατείδωλον οὔσαν τὴν πόλιν. 17 διελέγετο μὲν οὖν ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις καὶ τοῖς σεβομένοις καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ κατὰ πᾶσαν ἡμέραν πρὸς τοὺς παρατυγχάνοντας. 18 τινὲς δὲ καὶ τῶν Ἐπικουρείων καὶ Στοϊκῶν φιλοσόφων συνέβαλλον αὐτῷ, καὶ τινες ἔλεγον, Τί ἂν θέλοι ὁ σπερμολόγος οὗτος λέγειν; οἱ δὲ, Ξένων δαιμονίων δοκεῖ καταγγελεὺς εἶναι, ὅτι τὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ τὴν ἀνάστασιν^c εὐηγγελίζετο. 19 ἐπιλαβόμενοί τε αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἄρειον Πάγον ἤγαγον λέγοντες, Δυνάμεθα γνῶναι τίς ἢ καινὴ αὕτη ἢ ὑπὸ σοῦ λαλουμένη διδαχὴ; 20 ξενίζοντα γὰρ τίνα εἰσφέρεις εἰς τὰς ἀκοὰς ἡμῶν· βουλόμεθα οὖν γνῶναι τίνα θέλει ταῦτα εἶναι. 21 Ἀθηναῖοι δὲ πάντες καὶ οἱ ἐπιδημοῦντες ξένοι εἰς οὐδὲν ἕτερον ἠυκαίρουν ἢ λέγειν τι ἢ ἀκούειν τι καινότερον.

22 Σταθεὶς δὲ [ὁ] Παῦλος ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ Ἀρείου Πάγου ἔφη, Ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, κατὰ πάντα ὡς δεισιδαιμονεστέρους ὑμᾶς θεωρῶ. 23 διερχόμενος γὰρ καὶ ἀναθεωρῶν τὰ σεβάσματα ὑμῶν εὔρον καὶ βωμὸν ἐν ᾧ ἐπεγέγραπτο, Ἄγνώστῳ θεῷ. ὃ οὖν

ⁱ Jer 23:23; Wis 13:6; Rom 1:19.

* *‘In him we live and move and have our being’*: some scholars understand this saying to be based on an earlier saying of Epimenides of Knossos (6th century B.C.). *‘For we too are his offspring’*: here Paul is quoting Aratus of Soli, a third-century B.C. poet from Cilicia.

^j 19:26; Is 40:18–20; 44:10–17; Rom 1:22–23.

^k 10:42.

¹ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ac 17:16–34.

ἀγνοοῦντες εὐσεβεῖτε, τοῦτο ἐγὼ καταγγέλλω ὑμῖν. 24 ὁ θεὸς ὁ ποιήσας τὸν κόσμον καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ, οὗτος οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὑπάρχων κύριος οὐκ ἐν χειροποιήτοις ναοῖς κατοικεῖ 25 οὐδὲ ὑπὸ χειρῶν ἀνθρωπίνων θεραπεύεται προσδεόμενός τινος, αὐτὸς διδοὺς πᾶσιν ζωὴν καὶ πνοὴν καὶ τὰ πάντα 26 ἐποίησέν τε ἐξ ἐνὸς⁵ πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων κατοικεῖν ἐπὶ παντὸς προσώπου τῆς γῆς, ὀρίσας προστεταγμένους καιροὺς καὶ τὰς ὁροθεσίας τῆς κατοικίας αὐτῶν 27 ζητεῖν τὸν θεόν⁶, εἰ ἄρα γε ψηλαφήσειαν αὐτὸν καὶ εὐροῖεν, καὶ γε οὐ μακρὰν ἀπὸ ἐνὸς ἐκάστου ἡμῶν ὑπάρχοντα. 28 Ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ ζῶμεν καὶ κινούμεθα καὶ ἐσμέν, ὡς καὶ τινες τῶν καθ' ὑμᾶς ποιητῶν⁷ εἰρήκασιν,

Τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμέν.

29 γένος οὖν ὑπάρχοντες τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ὀφείλομεν νομίζειν χρυσῷ ἢ ἀργύρῳ ἢ λίθῳ, χαράγματι τέχνης καὶ ἐνθυμήσεως ἀνθρώπου, τὸ θεῖον εἶναι ὅμοιον. 30 τοὺς μὲν οὖν χρόνους τῆς ἀγνοίας ὑπεριδὼν ὁ θεός, τὰ νῦν παραγγέλλει τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πάντας πανταχοῦ μετανοεῖν, 31 καθότι ἔστησεν ἡμέραν ἐν ἧ ἡμέλῃ κρίνειν τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ, ἐν ἀνδρὶ⁸ ᾧ ὥρισεν, πίστιν παρασχὼν πᾶσιν ἀναστήσας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν.

32 Ἀκούσαντες δὲ ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν οἱ μὲν ἐχλεύαζον, οἱ δὲ εἶπαν, Ἀκουσόμεθά σου περὶ τούτου καὶ πάλιν. 33 οὕτως ὁ Παῦλος ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ μέσου αὐτῶν. 34 τινὲς δὲ ἄνδρες κολληθέντες αὐτῷ ἐπίστευσαν, ἐν οἷς καὶ Διονύσιος ὁ Ἀρεοπαγίτης καὶ γυνὴ ὀνόματι Δάμαρις καὶ ἕτεροι σὺν αὐτοῖς.²

COMMENTARY

Paul's second missionary journey—to Europe (Acts 15:36—18:22).

Paul and companions are travelling the famous Roman road from Philippi called **the Via Egnatia**—the main East-West Roman road. What has just happened, which explains why Paul was alone in Athens and “waiting for them,” is explained in the previous verses (vv10-15).

The great Roman highway, the Via Egnatia, began at Neapolis and ran through Philippi, *Amphipolis* (16:12 note), *Apollonia* and *Thessalonica*, and then on westwards across

² Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, Fifth Revised Edition. (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014), Ac 17:16–34.

Macedonia to the coast of the Adriatic Sea at Dyrrachium, from where travellers could cross to Italy. Paul’s missionary campaigns were greatly eased where good highways, the motorways or autobahns of the ancient world, aided his progress. **The missionaries made their way some 33 miles (53 km) to Amphipolis, 27 miles (43 km) to Apollonia, and then 35 miles (56 km) to Thessalonica; if these distances are meant to represent each a single day’s journey, the travellers must have made use of horses (see 21:15), but Luke may be simply noting the main towns through which they passed.** If missionary work took place in these towns, Luke does not mention it; **possibly they did not possess synagogues (there is no evidence of any), or possibly Paul was concerned to reach the main city of the province and work there.** *Thessalonica*, like Philippi, was an ancient city which had acquired a new lease of life in the Hellenistic era. It was made a free city by the Romans in 42 BC and had the appropriate rights of self-government on a Greek, rather than a Roman, pattern (Sherwin-White, pp. 95–98). It had a Jewish population, probably more than sufficient to establish a *synagogue*. Recent archaeological evidence indicates that later there was a Samaritan synagogue in the town.³



Regarding the city of Thessalonica in Macedonia, see *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1996, s.v. **Thessalonica**): “The chief city in Macedonia, located at the head of the Thermaic Gulf.... The city was founded in 316 BC by Cassander, a general in the army of Alexander the Great, who gave the city its name in honor of his wife, Thessalonikeia, the daughter of Philip II and half-sister of Alexander. The new city

³ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 292–293.

included the ancient Therme and some thirty-five other towns. **When Macedonia became a Roman Province in 146 BC, Thessalonica was made the capital and thus the center of Roman administration ...** its location as a main station on the famous Via Egnatia, which ran through the city on the east/west axis from the Balkans to Asia Minor.... The religious life of Thessalonica included a strong Jewish component.”

Regarding the city of Beroea in Macedonia, see *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1996, s.v. **Beroea**): “Located twenty-four miles inland from the Aegean Sea in the plain below Mount Bermion. Springs in the area gave the city its name, ‘place of many waters’.” The city was one through which the Via Egnatia ran.

PAUL ALONE IN ATHENS: SOCRATES-LIKE

After an introduction designed to attract the attention of the audience and to state the theme (verses 22f.), the main portion falls into three parts: (1) God is lord of the world; he does not need a temple or human cultic ritual (verses 24f.); (2) Man is God’s creation; he needs God (verses 26f.); (3) God and man are related; therefore idolatry is foolish (verses 28f.). There follows a conclusion, calling on men to abandon their ignorant ideas of God and to repent (verses 30f.; Dibelius, p. 27).⁴

- While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. (v 16)

παροξύνω impf. pass. παρωξυνόμην; literally *sharpen*; figuratively *arouse, excite, stimulate*; in a negative sense *provoke, irritate, cause to be upset*; only passive in the NT (AC 17.16; 1C 13.5)⁵

⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 298.

impf. imperfect

pass. passive

NT New Testament

⁵ Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. Vol. 4, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Baker's Greek New Testament library, Page 302. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000.

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 517) writes: “Athens, at that time a quiet little city [Horace speaks about *vacuae Athenae*] of some 5,000 citizens lived on its great past. For Luke it represents Gentile culture. That Paul was disturbed about the many idols (*kateidolon* where the *kata*- prefix means "full of") reminds us that the **Christians did not regard them as works of art**. As 1 Thessalonians 3:1 shows, Timothy had come to Athens with Paul, but Paul had sent him back forthwith to Thessalonica.”

The picture of the city painted by Luke has impressed different scholars as being remarkably true to life or as a brilliant literary product. There was in fact at Athens a blend of superstitious idolatry and enlightened philosophy. Paul’s speech, which is delivered before the philosophers, has often been thought to be rather irrelevant to their concerns, since it was directed more against popular idolatry. **In fact, however, it would have been very relevant to Epicureans, who thought it unnecessary to seek after God and had no fear of his judgment, and to Stoics, whose concept of God was pantheistic**. Paul in fact uses the insights of the philosophers in his attack on the beliefs of the Athenian populace; **the Epicureans attacked superstitious, irrational belief in the gods, expressed in idolatry, while the Stoics stressed the unity of mankind and its kinship with God, together with the consequent moral duty of man**. What Paul was doing was to side with the philosophers, and then demonstrate that they did not go far enough.^{17 6}

Regarding the ancient city of Athens, see *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1996, s.v. **Athens**): “The city stands on a site that has been continuously inhabited since the fourth millennium BC.” And regarding the Areopagus, see s.v. **Areopagus**: “The name means 'Hill of Ares', a low hill in Athens northwest of the Acropolis. The hill had stone seats for the council that met there, the origins of which went back to the advisory council of Athenian Kings. **Though the council's political power had declined by the fifth century BCE, it retained jurisdiction over cases of homicide.**”

Although Athens had once been the intellectual centre of the ancient world, it was now in a period of decline. It was a free city and had a famous university, but it tended to live on its reputation. When Paul arrived, he was not so much impressed by the culture as irritated by the evidences of idolatry. ‘He found himself confronted by a veritable forest of idols’, with vast numbers of images of Hermes all over the city and

¹⁷ C. K. Barrett, ‘Paul’s Speech on the Areopagus’, in M. E. Glaswell and E. W. Fasholé-Luke, *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World* (London, 1974), pp. 69–77.

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 298.

especially at the entrance to the *agora* (RSV *market place*) through which he probably walked.¹⁹⁷

- So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. (v 17)

Like the ancient philosophers, Paul walks about the city speaking about deep things with anyone willing to engage him.

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 527) writes: “The narrative framework is composed of a number of motifs which at that time every half-educated person recognized as specifically Athenian: the many temples and images, the special religiosity of the Athenians, their philosophical schools, the Areopagus (hill and court!), the Socratic dialogues in the marketplace, the introduction of new gods, **the Athenian curiosity**. Luke has let these motifs follow one another so closely that the impression of Athenian life and spirit grips the reader.... The reader should not indeed analyze the narrative, but rather surrender to its overall impression. So Luke conjures up the shadow of Socrates—without calling his name, we should note!—and the reader feels Paul is here entering upon a dangerous adventure, and begins to breathe freely again when Paul finally ‘goes out of their midst’.”

- Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) (v 18)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 517) writes: “Luke now introduces some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers detached from this general audience.... The Greek word here *sumballo* can mean ‘to converse with’ but also ‘to engage in an argument’. This double meaning or lack of sharpness in the description continues all through and is part of the individual character of this scene.... Luke will be thinking of the Epicureans with their materialism and practical atheism; for them Paul is a ‘babbling’. The Stoics, the ‘other ones’ certainly recognize that Paul is presenting a new religious message, but they do not comprehend

RSV American Revised Standard Version, Old Testament, 1952; New Testament, Second Edition, 1971.

¹⁹ R. E. Wycherley, ‘St Paul at Athens’, *JTS* 19, 1968, pp. 619–621.

⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 300.

this preaching either. **Luke reflects this by representing them as considering *anastasis* [“resurrection”] polytheistically, as a goddess standing alongside Jesus.”**

Reading Haenchen’s remarks above, I am reminded (13 May 2015) about how challenging it is to communicate religious knowledge to people who lack all access to the experiences, to the religious experiences that are the underpinning of the religious language. Without them having experienced God, it is exceedingly difficult to find the language to analogize to what you are trying to communicate to them.

Regarding the Epicureans, see *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1996, s.v. **Epicurean**): “The followers of the philosopher **Epicurus (342-270 BCE)**.... Epicurean teaching was expounded in a lengthy poem by the first-century BCE Latin writer Lucretius. Epicureans were often attacked as atheists, since they held that sense perception was the only basis for knowledge. Everything had come into being out of atoms and the void.... **No god had created or ruled over human beings.** Epicureans argued against fear of death, since in their view death was merely the dissolution of the atoms entangled to make up the human, and against fear of the gods, who would enjoy their own blessedness without troublesome concern for human affairs. **Free from these fears, they counseled, one should seek to live a peaceful life in which the body is free from pain and the mind peaceful and undisturbed. Consequently, one should choose a private life, pursuing this ideal in the pleasant company of friends.**”

Paul’s hearers included adherents of the *Epicurean and Stoic* philosophies. The former, who took their name from their founder Epicurus (341–270 BC), tended to be materialistic in outlook. **For them either the gods did not exist, or they were so far removed from the world as to exercise no influence on its affairs.** They taught a rudimentary atomic theory, and in their ethics they stressed the importance of pleasure and tranquility. They have often been falsely represented as sensualist in outlook, but in fact they had a lofty view of ‘pleasure’ and scorned sensualism.⁸

Regarding the Stoics, see *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1996, s.v. **Stoics**): “The members of a philosophical school founded in Athens by **Zeno (335-263 BCE)**.... the philosophy was best known for **its emphasis on moral conduct.** The school was named for the ‘Painted Porch’, a colonnade (Greek *stoa*), in which it met at Athens. The Stoics held that the entire universe was a living creature animated by the divine Logos (“reason” or “mind”). **This Logos was identified with Zeus.** Every person was a slave of the ruling Logos. Since the Logos pervaded everything, whatever happened in the universe was governed by this universal law of nature or providence. All human beings

⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 300.

were brothers and sisters in this universal, living body.... **Since everything that happens to people was determined, the only way in which individuals could control their lives was to control the passions governing how external events affected them.**

Control of oneself was the avenue by which humans shows their freedom and superiority to fortune.... One of the most famous Stoic teachers and writers of the first century, **Epictetus**, was a lame Phrygian from Hierapolis.... Another famous Stoic teacher was Nero's tutor and advisor, **Seneca**, who retired from the Court when Nero's career turned bad and was later forced to commit suicide by the suspicious Emperor. In the second century, the emperor **Marcus Aurelius**, who had studied Epictetus, recorded his meditations while in the field with his army.”

Their initial impression of Paul was not favourable. They dismissed him contemptuously as a *babbler*; the word designated a bird picking up scraps in the gutter, and hence came to be used of worthless loafers (the kind of person who today would pick up cigarette ends and smoke them) and also of persons who had acquired mere scraps of learning. There would appear to be a deliberate echo of the tradition about Socrates when Paul is said to proclaim strange *divinities*; here the word ‘demon’ is used in its neutral, Greek sense. The divinities in question were *Jesus* and *Resurrection*, the latter possibly being understood as the name of a goddess, although a contemptuous dismissal of the idea of resurrection, as taught by Paul, is just as likely an interpretation.⁹

PAUL TAKEN TO THE AREOPAGUS BY THE PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHERS

- So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? (v 19)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 518) writes: “The Greek verb *epilambanomai* [‘they took him’] has more than one meaning. Scholars either find in it an arraignment before the authorities or hold that Paul was brought out of the tumult of the marketplace to the quiet Hill of Mars. Both interpretations are doubtful: **there was room for only a very few men on the rugged, rocky summit** and not for such a large audience as Luke presupposes for this speech....”

⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 301.

In favour of view (2) are the facts that Paul's speech does not look like a legal defence and that there is no hint of any legal proceedings. **The argument that the hill was not large enough to hold a crowd is false.** The reference to Dionysius the Areopagite (verse 34), however, suggests that Luke meant to describe a meeting of the court, no doubt in public session and not necessarily taking the form of a legal trial.¹⁰

- It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” (v 20)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 520) writes: “The whole passage as it stands gives the impression that the philosophers expressed themselves in very refined language. Because the ‘foreign things’ are incomprehensible to the listeners, they will ‘to know’ (*gnonai*) what Paul means.... **The curiosity of the Athenians was proverbial** (see following verse).”

The occasion gave Paul an opportunity to spell out his views. His audience recognized that he was teaching strange things which they had not heard before, and they wanted to know what it all meant. **In a rare aside Luke comments that the Athenians themselves and visitors to the city were moved by sheer curiosity to hear something new, and that they had nothing better to do with their time than to enjoy intellectual titillation. Luke implies that they were not greatly concerned about the truth of what they heard; his tone is distinctly sarcastic.**¹¹

- Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. (v 21)

Here, the proverbial Greek curiosity is expressed. But perhaps what is captured here in this “curiosity” of the Athenians is their impatience with “old” wisdom, and their interest in hearing “new” and therefore “interesting” thoughts. I recall St. Augustine and his criticism of *curiositas*, by which he meant not a virtue (as we tend to use the word, a compliment given to someone always “curious”), but **the habit of an undisciplined mind, a mind that has lost contact with what it really needs to know and, instead, wanders about in the world of ideas, constantly searching for “interesting” things to wonder about.**

¹⁰ I. Howard Marshall, [*Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 301–302.

¹¹ I. Howard Marshall, [*Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 302.

PAUL'S SPEECH BEFORE THE PHILOSOPHERS

PAUL APPEALS TO THE TRADITIONAL GREEK PIETY

- Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. (v 22)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 520) writes: “Paul assumes the attitude of an orator (*statheis*).... The Athenians indeed ranked as particularly religious because of their many temples and idols.”

William Barclay (1976: 130) writes: “Athens had long since left behind her great days of action but she still was the greatest university town in the world, to which men seeking learning came from all over. She was a city of many gods. It was said that there were more statues of gods in Athens than in all the rest of Greece put together and that **in Athens it was easier to meet a god than a man**. In the great city square, people met to talk, for in Athens they did little else. Paul would have had no difficulty in getting someone to talk to, and the philosophers soon discovered him.”

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 528) writes: “**What the speech attacks, with arguments from the philosophy of the Greek enlightenment, is the heathen popular belief and not the religion of the philosophers**. If the speech is nonetheless directed to these philosophers, it is because Greek culture is to be exhibited in its highest representatives.”

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 529) writes: “At the time when the Acts originated, the Gentile-Christian Church was hardly any longer recruiting its members from the Gentile synagogue-visitors as in the days of Paul [the God-fearers]. **The Jews stood alienated and hostile against the Christians—Acts again and again points out this fact**. The Christian missionary preaching could no more expect in its Gentile hearers the same presuppositions as formerly for the proclamation of the gospel. The missionary could not longer begin with the Scripture proof for the Messiahship and resurrection of Jesus, when he addressed himself to the Gentiles.... *The Areopagus speech presented a new type of missionary preaching which met the different situation.*”

- For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. (v 23)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 521) writes: “Paul concludes from this devotion that the heathen live at one and the same time in a positive and negative relationship with the right God: *they worship him and yet do not know him*—they worship him indeed, but along with many other gods! Still, this altar shows that Paul introduces no ‘new gods’: the accusation raised against Socrates cannot validly be made against Christianity. Out of the ignorance of the Athenians concerning this God, it inevitably follows that Paul must proclaim him.”

That comment by Haenchen reminds me (13 May 2015) how far too often I have worked among people who worship God but do not know Him. What I mean is that so many worship in a rote way, a “going through the motions,” which I think is in large measure taught by priests who celebrate the Sacraments in a perfunctory way.

William Barclay (1976: 131-2) writes: “There were many altars to unknown gods in Athens. Six hundred years before this a terrible pestilence had fallen on the city which nothing could halt. A Cretan poet, Epimenides, had come forward with a plan. A flock of black and white sheep were let loose throughout the city from the Areopagus. Wherever each lay down, it was sacrificed to the nearest god; and if a sheep lay down near the shrine of no known god, it was sacrificed to ‘The Unknown God’. From this situation, Paul takes his starting point.”

AGAINST IDOLS MADE BY HUMAN HANDS

- The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, (v 24)

Paul has in mind here the verse from **Isaiah 42:5**—

“Thus says God, the LORD,
 who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
 who gives breath to the people upon it
 and spirit to those who walk in it.”

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 522) writes: “Paul constructs out of the Isaiah material a formula which expresses God's continuing Lordship—the point here is not the *conservatio* but the *gubernatio*—: *kurios huparchon*. This turn of phrase and the addition of the word *kosmos* makes the Old Testament statements sound Greek as well.”

GOD DOES NOT “NEED”

- nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. (v 25)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 522) writes: “After the polemic against the Temple comes the attack on Sacrifices. It is further based upon the idea of the Greek enlightenment (borrowed from the Jewish Hellenistic mission) that God needs nothing. But this negation is supplemented—and here again Isaiah 42:5 gains credit—without any loss of rapport with the enlightened Gentiles, by the positive sentence: God is the great provider who dispenses life, breath, and everything.”

GOD AS GOVERNOR OF THE KOSMOS, NOT MERELY ITS CONSERVATOR

- From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, (v26)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 523) writes: “Behind the whole much discussed expression stands the Psalm 74 (73):17.”

Psalm 74:15 You cut openings for springs and torrents;

you dried up ever-flowing streams.

16 Yours is the day, yours also the night;

you established the luminaries and the sun.

17 *You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;*

you made summer and winter.

- so that they would search for God [*zetein ton theon*] and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. (v 27)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 524) writes: “*To search for God* is the second task of mankind (which is to be accomplished during earthly life and first gives to man his own true meaning).”

Verse 27 - God’s purpose in all this was that men *might seek after him* in the hope of touching him and finding him. The language can be taken Hellenistically of the philosophical search for what is true or divine, without any certain hope of success. **But it is better taken in the Old Testament sense of the thankful and reverent longing of the whole man for the God whose goodness he has experienced (for the vocabulary of seeking and finding God see Isa. 55:6; 65:1; Ps. 14:2; Prov. 8:17; Jer. 29:13; Amos 9:12 LXX).** The unusual element is the word *feel after* which is perhaps suggestive of men groping in the darkness in order to find God. This groping takes place despite the nearness of God to men, of which Paul goes on to speak, and it may indicate the sinful failure of man to find God to which Romans 1:20f. point. **Nevertheless, the main point is that seeking should not be difficult since God is not far from each one of us. This was a thought current in Stoic philosophy, but there it was taken in an impersonal, intellectual sense.** Paul’s concern is with the living God of the Old Testament (Ps. 145:18) who is near to his worshippers despite his transcendence and greatness (Jer. 23:23f.).¹²

A REVERSAL OF STOIC PANTHEISM: WE LIVE IN GOD RATHER THAN GOD
IN ALL THINGS

- For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ (v 28)

LXX The Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of the Old Testament).

¹² I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 305.

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 524, note 3) writes: “That Luke himself constructed the opening clause is unlikely: he would himself have maintained no such immanence of man in God as the wording of the text asserts. It must be a matter of a received Stoic formulation.”

GOD IS GREATER THAN OUR SYMBOLIZATION OF HIM

- Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. (v29)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 525) writes: “On the basis of this understanding of God, pagan image worship is now assailed. The speaker falls back on the Jewish polemic against idolatry.... What originates in our artistic ability and consideration, and therefore stands under us, cannot portray the divine, which stands over us! **To the philosophers who were being addressed, this polemic would of course have offered nothing new: it hit only Greek popular religion and not he enlightened philosophical Hellenism.**”

GOD IS NO LONGER “UNKNOWN”

- While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, (v 30)

God can no longer be said to be “Unknown,” because Paul is making sure of this with this audience. Not only can the true God be claimed to be unknown, but also this God immediately makes claims on his hearers: “Repent!”

Until the coming of the revelation of God’s true nature in Christianity men lived in *ignorance* of him. But now the proclamation of the Christian message brings this time to an end so far as those who hear the gospel are concerned; **they no longer have any excuse for their ignorance**. God was prepared to *overlook* their ignorance, but now he will do so no longer, and calls on *all men everywhere to repent*.¹³

¹³ I. Howard Marshall, [*Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 306.

REPENTANCE AS A CONSEQUENCE OF IMMINENT JUDGMENT BY GOD

- because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (v 31)

The *because* here is essential to Paul's argument. In other words, repentance is not linked to personal knowledge and love of God, but on the simple reality that God who has the governance of the whole cosmos has already fixed the day on which He will judge each person. Time is running out!

This is a vague but specific reference to Jesus. Note that for these Greek philosophers, the argument about the First Person of the Trinity (God's governance, creating, providence, and so forth) is the key one to make.

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 530) writes: “**The later theologians deemed it unsatisfactory that the work of reconciliation between the gospel and Greek thought should be confined to the province of the first article of the Creed, and so they sought to tie up Christology with the concepts of Greek ontology.** This certainly did not eradicate the problem for good and all: it confronted the Church again and again. It confronts us too....”

THE SCANDAL OF THE RESURRECTION

- When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” (32)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 526) writes: “Once again the proclamation of the Resurrection of Jesus is incomprehensible to the Gentiles (cf. 17:18), and once again both groups react differently: one with open scoffing (Luke is probably thinking of the Epicureans), the other courteously requesting a deferment of further instruction.”

Verse 32 – Paul's return to his starting-point provoked the scorn of some of his hearers. Although Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, the idea of a bodily *resurrection* was alien to their thinking, since the body was increasingly regarded as earthly and evil

in comparison with the soul which was the seat of the divine in man.²⁸ **Not only was the cross ‘folly to Gentiles’, but so also was the resurrection.** Others of Paul’s hearers said that they would *hear* him on another occasion; this is often interpreted as simply a more polite form of dismissal, but the contrast expressed with the first group may suggest that this was a more positive reaction, and that these people longed that what Paul said was true.¹⁴

PAUL’S DIGNIFIED AND UNENCUMBERED DEPARTURE

- At that point Paul left them. (v 33)

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 526) writes: “Luke does not portray a pitiful departure, but rather lets the reader feel that Paul has happily emerged from a difficult situation. **Not he but the audience has failed.**”

MISSIONARY SUCCESS: A FEW CONVERTS

- But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (v 34)

Verses 33-34 – This verdict is confirmed by the fact that after Paul had left the gathering he did gain some converts. **One in particular was a member of the Areopagus called *Dionysius*. This indicates that Paul’s audience certainly contained members of the court of the Areopagus, whether or not we identify the occasion as a meeting of the court.** Nothing certain is known about Dionysius, although later tradition turned him into the first bishop of Athens (a fair inference since the first converts often became the leaders of the church, 1 Cor. 16:15f.). Later still he was credited with the authorship of some fifth-century Neoplatonic writings. Along with the men converted there was also a woman called *Damaris*, about whom we again know nothing. Whether a church was

²⁸ It may be significant that the Greek poet Aeschylus had depicted the god Apollo as denying the resurrection on the occasion of the inauguration of the Court of the Areopagus (*Eumenides*, 647f.; Bruce, *Book*, pp. 363f.).

¹⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 308.

formed at this stage is doubtful; Paul describes some of his Corinthian converts as the 'first fruits of Achaia' (1 Cor. 16:15).¹⁵

¹⁵ I. Howard Marshall, [*Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 308.