

**Children of the Greater God:
Paul with the Philosophers on Mars Hill-
An Example of Cross-Cultural Ministry**

Acts 17:16-34

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Paul on Mars Hill – An Example of Cross-Cultural Ministry

Thesis

Paul's encounter with the philosophers on Mars Hill provides an excellent example of cross-cultural ministry. Paul was a Hellenistic Jew with a detailed knowledge of the dominant Greek culture and philosophy. Paul's calling was to take the Gospel to the Gentile world. The philosophers that Paul encounters on Mars Hill were the intelligencia of his day¹.

It is the thesis of this paper that Paul's detailed knowledge of the Greek philosophies of his day was a key component to his outreach on Mars Hill.

The Passage

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. 17 Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. 18 Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoics, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. 19 And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? 20 For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. 21 (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.) 22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of

¹ Some sources compare them to modern day University professors. Such a comparison is not without merit, even though it is anachronistic.

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Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. 23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. 24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; 25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; 26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; 27 That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: 28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. 29 Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. 30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: 31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. 32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. 33 So Paul departed from among them. 34 Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Detailed Exegesis

This section will perform a detailed exegesis of the passage using the historical, grammatical and contextual method as the tool-set to best understand the meaning of the passage.

Historical Background

This section examines the historical context of Paul's encounter on Mar's Hill.

Athens in the First Century AD

Athens was a prominent city on the island of Greece. Perseus describes Athens as:

The city lies approximately in the middle of the largest plain of the region, at a distance of 6-7 km from the shore of the Saronic gulf. Except for the S edge, which is open to the sea, the plain is enclosed on all sides by a wall of mountains, Hymettos, Pentele, Parnes, and Aigaleos. At first the city was established on the rock of the Acropolis, but in time it spread out all around to a distance of not greater than 1 km, over terrain that was level except for the SW quarter, which was hilly and included the hills of the Muses, of the Pnyx, of the Nymphs, and of the Areopagus². The Eridanos River cut through the city at the N, the Ilissos at the E, and to the W at a distance of 3 km flowed the Kephisos³.

² This is the general area where the entire Acts 17 passage takes place.

³ Information on Athens is found on the Internet on the Perseus site at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0006:id%3Dathens>

The Areopagus

There are two meanings to “Areopagus.” This has led to some confusion among interpreters of the Biblical text in the past. One of the meanings is a location and the other is a body of judges for the city of Athens. The text uses both meanings. A modern analogy is the Capitol Hill in Washington, D. C. Although there is a hill that the Capitol building is located on, the phrase is generally used to refer to the legislative body of men and women who assemble on Capitol Hill.

According to Herodotus, the Areopagus was a hill opposite the acropolis⁴. Pausanias (ca 175 AD) states that the city was allegedly named after Ares, who was killed there⁵.

Pausanias also mentions the Council of the Areopagus⁶. This is most likely what Luke was referring to by the Areopagus. Paul was brought before this Council. The

Encyclopedia Britannica states:

Areopagus - earliest aristocratic council of ancient Athens. The name was taken from the Areopagus (“Ares' Hill”), a low hill northwest of the Acropolis, which was its meeting place. . . From the middle of the 4th century BC, its prestige revived once again, and by the period of Roman domination in Greece it was again discharging significant administrative, religious, and educational functions⁷.

⁴ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 8.52.1

⁵ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.28.5

⁶ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.24.2.

⁷ On the Internet at: <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=9451&tocid=0>.

Idols in Athens – Greek Gods

Pausanias (ca 175 AD) describes the gods that Paul would have seen on his walking tour through Athens⁸. Pausanias also specifically notes the religiousness of the Athenians.

What is most striking about his description is the great number of statues of various gods in Athens. This fits quite well with Paul’s description of the Athenians:

In this place is a statue of Athena striking Marsyas the Silenus for taking up the flutes that the goddess wished to be cast away for good. Opposite these I have mentioned is represented the fight which legend says Theseus fought with the so-called Bull of Minos, whether this was a man or a beast of the nature he is said to have been in the accepted story. For even in our time women have given birth to far more extraordinary monsters than this. [2] There[±] is also a statue of Phrixus the son of Athamas carried ashore to the Colchians by the ram. Having sacrificed the animal to some god or other, presumably to the one called by the Orchomenians Laphystius, he has cut out the thighs in accordance with Greek custom and is watching them as they burn. Next come other statues, including one of Heracles strangling the serpents as the legend describes. There is Athena too coming up out of the head of Zeus, and also a bull *dedicated* by the Council of the Areopagus on some occasion or other, *about* which, if one cared, one could make

⁸ Acts 17:16 states that the city was “wholly given over to idolatry.” This is shown quite clearly in the ancient quote from Pausanias.

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many conjectures. [3] **I have *already* stated that the Athenians are far more devoted to religion than other men.** They were the first to surname Athena Ergane (Worker); they were the first to set up limbless Hermae, and the temple of their goddess is shared by the Spirit of Good men. Those who prefer artistic workmanship to mere antiquity may look at the following: a man wearing a helmet, by Cleoetas, whose nails the artist has *made* of silver, and an image of Earth beseeching Zeus to rain upon her; perhaps the Athenians themselves needed showers, or maybe all the Greeks had been plagued with a drought. There also are set up Timotheus the son of Conon and Conon himself; Procne too, who has already made up her *mind* about the boy, and Itys as well--a *group* dedicated by Alcamenes. Athena is represented displaying the olive plant, and Poseidon the wave, [4] and there are statues of Zeus, one made by Leochares and one called Polieus (Urban), the customary mode of sacrificing to whom I will give without adding the traditional reason thereof. Upon the altar of Zeus Polieus they place barley mixed with wheat and leave it unguarded. The ox, which they keep already prepared for sacrifice, goes to the altar and partakes of the grain. One of the priests they call the ox-slayer, who kills the ox and then, casting aside the axe here according to the ritual runs away. The others bring the axe to trial, as though they know not the man who did the deed.

[5] Their ritual, then, is such as I have described. As you enter the temple that they name the Parthenon, all the sculptures you see on what is called the pediment refer to the birth of Athena, those on the rear pediment represent the contest for

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the land between Athena and Poseidon. The statue itself is made of ivory and gold. On the middle of her helmet is placed a likeness of the Sphinx--the tale of the Sphinx I will give when I come to my description of Boeotia--and on either side of the helmet are griffins in relief. [6] These griffins, Aristeas of Proconnesus says in his poem, fight for the gold with the Arimaspi beyond the Issedones. The gold which the griffins guard, he says, comes out of the earth; the Arimaspi are men all born with one eye; griffins are beasts like lions, but with the beak and wings of an eagle. I will say no more about the griffins. [7] The statue of Athena is upright, with a tunic reaching to the feet, and on her breast the head of Medusa is worked in ivory. She holds a statue of Victory about four cubits high, and in the other hand a spear; at her feet lies a shield and near the spear is a serpent. This serpent would be Erichthonius. On the pedestal is the birth of Pandora in relief. Hesiod and others have sung how this Pandora was the first woman; before Pandora was born there was as yet no womankind. The only portrait statue I remember seeing here is one of the emperor Hadrian, and at the entrance one of Iphicrates, who accomplished many remarkable achievements.

[8] Opposite the temple is a bronze Apollo, said to be the work of Pheidias. They call it the Locust God, because once when locusts were devastating the land the god said that he would drive them from Attica. That he did drive them away they know, but they do not say how. I myself know that locusts have been destroyed three times in the past on Mount Sipylus, and not in the same way. Once a gale

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arose and swept them away; on another occasion violent heat came on after rain and destroyed them; the third time sudden cold caught them and they died.

The Marketplace/Agora

The mall of yesterday⁹, the Agora was the place where the ancient people met to do business and just talk. Much of the ancient Agora of Athens has been excavated by archaeologists¹⁰. The Hellenistic Ministry of Culture describes the history of the archeological digs as:

The first excavation campaigns were carried out by the Greek Archaeological Society in 1859-1912, and by the German Archaeological Institute in 1896-97. In 1890-91, a deep trench cut for the Athens-Peiraeus Railway brought to light extensive remains of ancient buildings. In 1931 the American School of Classical Studies started the systematic excavations with the financial support of J. Rockefeller and continued until 1941. Work was resumed in 1945 and is still continuing. In order to uncover the whole area of the Agora it was necessary to demolish around 400 modern buildings covering a total area of ca. 12 hectares¹¹.

⁹ Much more than a mall, the Agora was the heart of ancient Athens, the focus of political, commercial, administrative and social activity, the religious and cultural centre, and the seat of justice.

¹⁰ See, *The Athenian Agora: A Guide to the Excavation and Museum / American School of : Classical Studies in Athens* (Athens: Ekdotike Hellados, 1976). See Also, Camp, John M. *The Athenian Agora Excavations in the Heart of Classical Athens* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1986).

¹¹ On the Internet at: <http://www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21101a/e211aa03.html>.

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The Agora was home to at least a half dozen prominent temples to various gods. It was also the location of the Council of 500, who were distinct from the members of the Areopagus in the Acts 17 passage. The Roman Agora of the first century covered an area of 111 x 98 m. This is nearly the area of two modern football fields¹².



(Archeological digs at the Agora in Athens from the north-west)

¹² On the Internet at: <http://www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21101a/e211aa04.html>.

Busts of the Philosophers



(From left to right; Socrates, Cynic founder-Antisthenes, Stoic founder-Chrysippos, Epicurean founder-Epikurius. Photo shot at the British Museum by permission for non-commercial uses © 2001 – Doug Gilliland – All Rights Reserved).

Stoics

The Stoic philosophy was founded by Zeno of Citium (c. 340-265 BC). Stoicism came out of Cynicism. Stoicism was founded in Athens. Prominent Stoics of the First Century AD were Arius Didymus of Alexandria (63 BC-10 AD), L. Anneaus Seneca (d. 65 AD), Epictetus of Hierapolis (c. 50-138 AD). Zeno of Tarsus (3rd century BC) and Antipater of Tarsus (first century AD) share Paul's hometown where it is quite possible that Paul originally learned of their Stoic doctrines.

Evil, to the Stoics, was the failure of man's reason to control his passion¹³. Wisdom, defined as rational insight or knowledge, was their chief good¹⁴.

¹³ Sahakian, p. 38.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 39.

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Stoic social philosophy paralleled Christianity in many ways. They were indifferent to nationalism and viewed the common brotherhood of man as innate in natural law¹⁵.

However, the Stoic religious views had pantheistic characteristics. They were strictly monotheistic, identifying god with nature. When Paul identifies God as separate and distinct from nature he is challenging their pantheistic beliefs.

The Stoic believed in one supreme, universal deity who was the creator and sustainer of the universe. On this point they also had common ground with Paul. Paul used this common ground to his advantage in his discourse. This illustrates the crucial fact that Paul would seek common ground with his hearers – even pagan ones. As the minister to the Gentiles, Paul was to seek this common ground with his audience frequently.

Stoics had a belief in fatalism. This belief was that divine providence determined all events beforehand and these events all contribute to the grand plan and purpose of nature¹⁶. Paul makes note of their belief in the sovereignty of God, but turns from their pantheistic concept with his statement:

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 40.

¹⁶ Clark., p. 161.

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Acts 17:26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation¹⁷;

Epicureans

The Epicurean philosophy was founded by Epicurus (341-270 BC). Like Stoicism, Epicureanism was founded in Athens¹⁸. Epicureans held that pleasure (defined as a sense of well being) was the sole good. Their conclusion was that the basic objective of life is to escape suffering. For them, the wisest sages were those who avoided pain. Thus, to the Epicureans the notion of a suffering and dying God was philosophically unthinkable. For them, a wise god would avoid such suffering. This was the main point where the Gospel was foolishness to the Greeks¹⁹.

The Epicureans believed in friendship, but only so far as friendship goes in producing pleasure.

¹⁷ This is one of the most deterministic statements in all of Paul and may be a quote of one of the Stoic philosophers. At the very least, the determinism of the passage is consistent with Stoicism. For this reason, this passage is a favorite one of *hyper*-Calvinists.

¹⁸ Sahakian, p. 44.

¹⁹ Paul summed up the reaction of the people of his age to the Gospel in: 1 Cor 1:23 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness. Paul is probably referring to Epicureans in that passage.

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The Epicureans held was that there was no afterlife. As materialists, they believed that the soul consisted of atomic material, which disintegrates at death²⁰. To the Epicureans, even the gods were corporeal beings²¹. Epicurus contended that the fear of death, instead of being the source of mental anguish, should become a matter of indifference to us, since there is no reason to fear it while we are alive, therefore not yet within its clutch, a certainly, when death does overtake us, we can be sure of experience either a future life or a state in which neither fear nor anything else can be sensed²².

Objections to Paul's Gospel due to Philosophical Presuppositions

Looking closely at the points of the passage, it's quite clear that Paul directly speaks to the views of the philosophers. He states points of agreement and disagreement quite clearly.

In Greek philosophy, the soul was seen as eternal, but the body was not. What made Paul's message objectionable to the Greek philosophers was not only did Paul preach the immortality of the soul, but he also preached the immortality of the body. Paul's notion of the resurrection of the flesh would have been too carnal a message for the Greeks.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 45.

²¹ Ibid, p. 46.

²² Ibid, p. 46.

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There's a certain strain in the modern Christian church that has objections to the resurrection of the flesh preferring rather to see in Scriptures a spiritual resurrection rather than a resurrection of the actual flesh²³.

Summary of the Competing Philosophies at Mar's Hill

A matrix comparing the views of the philosophers with Paul is:

| Object/Concept | Epicureans | Stoics | Christian/Paul |
|--|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Number of gods? | Many. | Monotheistic. | One God |
| Relationship of God to material world | Gods were / are corporeal beings. | Pantheistic. Identify God with nature. | God is separate from nature. |
| God is personal/ impersonal? | No personal god. | Impersonal. | Personal |
| View of suffering | Truly wise men avoid pain. | Meet it with indifference. | The godly suffer even more than the ungodly |
| Chief Goal of man? | 1 - Get pleasure. 2- Avoid pain. | 1 – Control passions with reason. 2 – Get wisdom. | Know God |
| What happens after death? | Generally indifferent to issue. | Soul returns to nature. | Resurrection of the flesh and soul. |

It's clear that Paul's position is quite different than that of either philosophy on most points.

The Unknown God

Pausanias states that the Athenians had an altar of the gods named Unknown at Munychia, one of their harbors²⁴. This is a common ancient practice²⁵.

²³ Harris, Murray. *Raised Immortal* is one example of a proponent of this view. Harris is a professor at the conservative Trinity Divinity School. Harris sees the resurrection body as spiritual rather than physical.

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One explanation for the origin of this practice was given by Diogenes Laertius (200-250) who recounted that, in order to relieve Athens of a plague, Epimenides (ca. 600 BCE), a Cretan wonder-worker, "took sheep, some black and others white, and brought them to the Areopagus; and there he let them go whither they pleased, instructing those that followed them to mark the spot where each sheep lay down and to offer a sacrifice to the local divinity. And thus, it is said, the plague was stayed. Hence even to this day altars may be found in different parts of Attica with no name inscribed upon them, which are memorials of this atonement."²⁶

An alternative is that Paul saw one of the many statues that had no inscription as to the name of the deity. In this alternative, the description "to an unknown god" would not be the inscription on the bust, but the fact that there was no inscription would signal that the name of the god was unknown.

The Debate Climate of the Day

Unlike today, the people of that age were accustomed to vigorous religious and philosophical debates. The Stoics and Epicureans, who dominated Athens, had been in friendly contention with each other in Athens for several hundred years²⁷.

²⁴ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.1.4.

²⁵ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.14.8 refers to an altar to the Unknown Gods in Olympia.

²⁶ Found on the Internet at: <http://www.abrock.com/Greece-Turkey/godunknown.html>.

²⁷ Per Clark, p. 156, both philosophies continued in competitive existence until eclipsed by Neo-platonism.

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When Paul showed up on the scene, he brought information that was new and completely different to their debates. After a few hundred years of the same old debates, this must have been intensely interesting to the people there who it is said, “liked to hear new things.”

Paul had a great advantage over our current era in that his audience was both willing and accustomed to listening. The disadvantage that Paul had was the utter foreignness of much of what he preached. This is the condition that our society is quickly moving towards.

Contextual Analysis

This section looks at the context of the passage.

General Context

This passage contains Paul’s second missionary journey that took place in 52 AD. Paul had been called approximately 20 years earlier to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. In the passage, Paul is waiting for the arrival of Silas and Timothy. Paul is preaching the Gospel in the synagogue on the Sabbath and preaching Christ in the marketplace the rest of the week. While waiting, Paul goes into the Jewish synagogue and shares the Gospel with the Jews and Hellenistic converts. In the course of being in the city, Paul gets into discussions with people about religion in the marketplace. Paul is a person who clearly makes the most of every opportunity that is presented before him.

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Details of the Context of the Passage

The passage shows Paul gathering a small following consisting of Jews he is disputing from the synagogue and devout Greeks. The fact that he was getting a gathering caused the philosophers to take note of him. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers decided to find out what he was teaching. When they started listening to Paul, they found that he was teaching something that was very foreign to their ears.

Some commentators think that they thought Paul was preaching two new gods, Jesus and the resurrection. The merit of this argument is that they said Paul was preaching strange gods (plural) rather than a strange god (singular). It's difficult to know exactly what they intended by the reference to strange gods. Certainly a part of the message Paul brought was the concept of the Fatherhood of God and the Sonship of Jesus. To these Greek philosophers, that could be gods (plural), but the text does not make this point clear enough to draw a dogmatic conclusion. At the very least, it is clear that Paul was preaching the resurrection of Jesus.

Their response was to take Paul to the city council. The council was responsible for allowing philosophers to speak in Athens. Apparently, they had the legal power to investigate what Paul was teaching and determine if he should be allowed to continue to speak. The text does not state the nature or extent of this threat to Paul's freedom of speech. The passage portrays the issue as one of their interest in novel matters. Paul takes advantage of the opportunity to share the Gospel with them.

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Paul notes that they have an altar to the unknown God and uses that as the springboard to his monologue before the Council. This is just too good an opportunity for witnessing for Paul let it to pass by.

Paul makes a number of points in his sermon to the Athenians. The God that they call the Unknown God was know by Paul and His characteristics are:

- He is Creator of the world and everything in it (some would agree, others not)
- He is Lord of Heaven and Earth (they had many lords)
- He doesn't dwell in temples (reference to the Parthenon and other temples)
- He doesn't need anything from men (reference to the priests of the temples)
- He isn't worshipped by making idols of Him (reference to the idols)
- He gives life, breath and all things (appeals to Pantheist)
- He made from one man all men (brotherhood of man fit their philosophies)
- He is sovereign over history and man's habitations (Stoic fatalism)
- His goal is that man find him (rather than capricious gods)
- He is near all of us (appeals to Pantheist)

Paul then quotes a couple of the Greek philosophers. These are very important quotes to the thesis of this paper. Certainly one explanation could be that Paul could have known their hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit and preached the message (so far) without any concept of their philosophies, although the passage does not indicate this was the case. Simply put, by quoting these literary sources, Paul demonstrates that he is familiar with their views. This was a place of common ground for Paul and the philosophers and

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Paul made the most of that common ground. What is not clear in the text is whether or not these quotes were pivotal to the persuasiveness of Paul's argument.

The first quote is one that testified to the same concept that Paul proclaimed of a God that is near man. It shows that Paul was familiar with the writings of the Greek poets. This original passage has been identified with several possible candidates, but it appears that the original does not survive.

The second quote. "for we are his offspring" was probably taken from Aratus, who was born in the Cilician coast town of Soli about 310 BC and died about 240 BC²⁸. Aratus wrote, "Ever and in all ways we all enjoy Jupiter, for we are also his offspring²⁹."

Paul's next conclusion is logical. Paul notes that since we are offspring of God, we shouldn't think that God would be less than we are. This is a direct attack on the idolatry of the city. The statues of gold, silver and stone were everywhere in the city. If we come from God, why should gods come from us? This has always been the strongest argument of the Jewish religion against idolatry. Paul makes this same case in other places in his epistles³⁰. In the first Council of the church, held at Jerusalem, this prohibition against

²⁸ Lenski, p. 732.

²⁹ Aratus, *Phaenomena*. Work was an astronomical treatise that is noted for its 44 constellations.

³⁰ Rom 2:22,

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idols from Judaism was applied to Christians³¹. Paul lists it as one of the few offenses that should cause one to break Christian fellowship³².

After this point, Paul starts to lose his audience by abandoning the common ground. The most offensive statements were:

- Day of Judgment coming
- Jesus as judge
- Resurrection of Jesus

The resurrection was the final straw for the philosophers. As noted, preaching the resurrection brought him in direct conflict over something that they all disagreed with Paul about. Greek philosophy viewed the body as temporal. None of the Greek philosophers had ever envisioned a resurrection of the flesh³³. Yet, that's exactly what Paul was preaching to them³⁴. The reaction was predictable. Some of them mocked Paul.

³¹ Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25. Also, 1 Cor 8:1-7.

³² In 1 Cor 5:10-11, Paul warns the Corinthians not to associate with idolatrous brothers. In 1 Cor 6:9 and Eph. 5:5, Paul writes that idolaters will not inherit the kingdom of God.

³³ This requires an eschatological vision.

³⁴ This stands as a counterpoint to the Seventh Day Adventist claim that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was a concretion from Greek philosophy. If there were to be a compromise with Greek philosophy, surely it would have been over the subject of the resurrection of the flesh. This was abhorrent to the Greek mind.

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After all, how could God possibly raise the dead? Others were more open to the idea. And it is true that someone has to propose an idea for the first time.

After preaching, Paul left the assembly. There is no indication in the text that he had any restrictions placed on his actions in Athens. There were few converts, though. The foolishness of this world had a stronghold in Athens for all but a few.

Grammatical Analysis

The key words in the passage are examined in this section.

17:16 - καταειδωλον - wholly given to idolatry (KJV)

Also, excessive as to idols. This is the only use of this compound word in the New Testament.

vv. 16-18 use the imperfect tense. This is like a moving picture showing what was happening in those days³⁵. The final outcome of this is in vv. 19 and 22 where the aorist tense is used.

18 – συνεβαλλον - encountered

Literally, they kept throwing words or statements together with him.

³⁵ Lenski, p. 711.

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Lenski comments that Paul only uses one article in reference to the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers³⁶. He sees this as Luke lumping the two philosophies together.

18 – σπερμολογος- babbler

Literally, this means seed-worder. Used by the Athenians as an insult indicating that the person was picking ideas/words like a bird picks up seeds from the ground, but without any real knowledge of the meaning of the words he was using³⁷. Knowledge of this idiomatic expression is a valuable textual indicator that enhances the authenticity of this text by placing Luke concretely into the scene.

18 - δαίμονιων - gods

Although this word is also translated as demons in other places, in this context, it fits better as gods. After all, the Jewish concept of demons was not what the Athenians had in mind when he said that Paul was proclaiming new gods.

19 - ο αρειος παγος - Areopagus

Mar's Hill. Hill of Mars (Ares).

22 - ανδρες αδελφοι = Ye men of Athens

Formula of address. Used by Demosthenes in addressing the men of Athens³⁸.

³⁶ Ibid, 711-712.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 712.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 721.

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23 - σεβασματα - devotions

Objects of worship. Includes temples, statues, altars.

23 - βουμον - altars

23 – ΑΓΜΩΣΤΩ ΘΕΟ - TO THE UNKNOWN GOD

Singular. One God would be included in Gods. Paul already demonstrates why there is only one God – thereby eliminating the others. The question is now which one. Whether or not there was an altar which used the singular is not relevant to the point Paul is making.

Paul's Converts

Success is not defined by a large numbers of converts. Paul's experience on Mar's Hill demonstrates this. The text says that only a few were attracted to the Gospel.

Dionysius the Areopagite

Eusebius records that:

Besides these, that Areopagite, named Dionysius, who was the first to believe after Paul's address to the Athenians in the Areopagus (as recorded by Luke in the

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Acts) is mentioned by another Dionysius, an ancient writer and pastor of the parish in Corinth, as the first bishop of the church at Athens³⁹.

This man was an Areopagite, one of the Upper Council. Athenian citizens could serve on the council for only one year. They could serve later after being off the council for some number of years. To prevent a tyrant from ruling, a vote could be taken to remove a member for ten years.

An irony in the text is that the convert Dionysius was named after the god of wine⁴⁰. The man who was named after son of the great god Zeus became a son of the one true God by adoption. He was converted to the one who changed water into wine⁴¹.

Damaris – A woman

Also named as a female convert was Damaris. Her role was not described but she was significant enough that Luke named her rather than leaving her unnamed. Damaris is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture.

³⁹ Eusebius, Hist. Eccl., 3.4.11.

⁴⁰ Renamed Bacchus by the Romans. The son of Zeus.

⁴¹ There was a Greek myth that Dionysius had turned an entire sea into wine.

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Luke emphasizes the role of women in the Gospel of Luke and Acts. Earlier in Acts 17, Luke made note that in Thessalonica a number of prominent women believed as a result of Paul's preaching⁴². It's possible that Damaris was a prominent woman of Athens.

Unnamed Converts

The text indicates that there were other unnamed converts from the Gentiles in Athens.

Conclusions

The goal of this paper was to demonstrate the value of understanding the culture in which the preacher finds himself. Paul used his knowledge of the Greek philosophy to reach out to the people he met in the marketplace and before the philosophers of Mar's Hill. The extent of Paul's intentionality is difficult to know. Whether Paul was aware of Greek philosophy by cultural contact or whether he specifically studied Greek philosophy is not stated in the Biblical text. What is clear is that Paul was well aware of the views of the philosophers and used their views in his own points of dialog with the philosophers.

Paul's message before the Areopagus fulfilled his calling from earlier in Acts⁴³. Not only did Paul speak to the Gentile people, but to their rulers. Only with the guidance of the Holy Spirit could Paul have had such an opportunity to preach to such a prominent group as the Areopagus. Paul's mission was a God given mission and it was God sized⁴⁴.

⁴² Acts 17:4.

⁴³ Acts 9:15 But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

⁴⁴ To borrow a phrase from a certain Mariners Church pastor.

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Finally, the text shows us that Paul did not soft-sell the Gospel. Paul knew that the resurrection was a stumbling stone to the Greeks, but he still preached the message even knowing it would not be a popular one. His refusal to compromise the Gospel is noteworthy since it would have been expedient to have simply deleted the objectionable part of his message to get broader acceptance. Christianity was not like the mystery religions of the day where only after initiation did the initiate learn the deeper secrets. The message of Christ was to be proclaimed clearly to all men.

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