

Notes on Acts 17

Paul's Visits to Thessalonica and Boerea (vv. 1-17)

Acts 17 outlines several of Paul's travels. He and Silas travel first through Amphipolis and Apollonia, along the Via Egnatia, the main east-west route in Macedonia (Harold Attridge in *HarperCollins Study Bible*), to Thessalonica, a major city. It is "headquarters for the Roman governor and the leading city of the province of Macedonia" (Attridge, *Harper-Collins Study Bible*). There, Paul goes to the synagogue, which is his usual approach in a new city, on three consecutive sabbath days to explain and convince his fellow Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. The synagogue was a place established primarily for reading the Torah, praying, and communal activities (Lee I. Levine in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 519). Paul uses this opportunity to hold a dialogue with those who attend the synagogue.

Paul argues, on the basis of Jewish scriptures, that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead – a very different understanding of the Messiah from what most were expecting but consistent with what Jesus taught about himself. This idea of divine necessity is typical of Luke's writing (Attridge). Gary Gilbert notes that "The suffering and resurrection of the Messiah are common themes in Luke-Acts ... but absent in the Tanakh and contemporary Jewish tradition." (*The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 637). N. T. Wright calls

The fact of a crucified Messiah ... the major roadblock in the way of any devout Jew believing that Jesus was or could be God's anointed. How could God allow such a thing? How could God be honored thereby? And how could God do, through such a Messiah, the messianic work of bringing peace and justice to the world and rebuilding the temple? It wasn't the way many in the synagogue community wanted to understand the story of Israel. (from N.T. Wright. *Acts* (*N. T. Wright for Everyone Bible Study Guides*), p. 85.)

Nevertheless, some of the people who heard Paul in Thessalonica joined Paul and Silas. This included both Jews and Greeks – godfearers, or devout Greeks who were interested in becoming Jewish – and "not a few of the leading women."

Verse 5 begins a cycle of opposition by "the Jews" – most likely referring to certain Jewish leaders – who incite "ruffians in the marketplaces" to form a mob and set the city in an uproar. Gilbert points out that while Paul was charged with disturbing the city, "Acts represents Jews as the disturbers." (*The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 637) When the mob cannot

immediately find Paul and Silas, they attack the home of Jason, who has been hosting Paul and Silas. They drag Jason before the city authorities, shouting,

These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.

“World Turned Upside Down”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFSwkIgN2oM>

This is a serious charge, as “the rulers of the city ... knew well how jealous the emperor was of his authority” (Stellhorn, Frederick. *Annotations on the Acts of the Apostles (Lutheran Commentary Series Book 6)*). This is basically the same charge that was written as the reason for Jesus’ crucifixion: He was the king of the Jews. However, Jason and his crew are able to post bail and are released. We never hear what happened to them after this.

William Willimon observes,

The trumped-up charges which jealous Jews in Thessalonica bring against Paul and Silas have more than a grain of truth in them. Even though the disciples are not the political threat the people and the authorities fear, the Empire is not secure with these Christians on the loose, Christians who teach “that there is another King, Jesus.” (*Acts: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 141).

Prudently, the believers in Thessaloniki send Paul and Silas off that night, to the city of Beroea, a city south of the Via Egnatia. Again, Paul and Silas go to the synagogue, where they receive a better hearing than in Thessalonica. The Jewish members of the synagogue in Beroea “welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing.”

Despite this good reception, trouble follows Paul and Silas from Thessalonica, as their opponents travel to Beroea to incite the crowds against Paul and Silas there. Again, the believers send Paul away. Since Silas and Timothy remain behind, it is likely that Paul is the focus of the Thessalonians’ wrath, while Silas and Timothy have retained a lower profile.

Why did Silas and Timothy stay behind? The *Lutheran Commentary* suggests that it *may* have been to help start a new congregation.

The believers take Paul to the coast and then to Athens, where they leave him. He asks them to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible.

Paul in Athens (vv. 16-33)

Although Paul follows his usual pattern of going to the synagogue, Athens is different from other cities Paul has visited. Despite its glorious past, Athens has become more provincial, although Rome has given it the status of a “free city” (Lutheran Commentary). Harold Attridge argues that “The conflicting responses to Christian preaching in two cities prepare for Paul’s important speech in Athens” (*Harper-Collins Study Bible*).

As one who was raised as a devout Jew, Paul is distressed to see the city of Athens full of idols. Because of this, he takes his argument both to the synagogue, with the Jews and other devout persons there, and also to the marketplace, with whoever happened to be there.

The Greek culture of Athens becomes evident as Paul encounters Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who debate with him. This is not an entirely friendly reception. Some ask what this “babbling” or empty talker wants to say (Attridge: babbling is literally “one who picks up seeds,” i.e., a person who gathers new ideas indiscriminately.) Others misunderstood Paul’s message about Jesus and the resurrection as a proclamation of foreign gods or goddesses. They therefore suspect Paul of being a proclaimer of foreign divinities, which Attridge notes was a charge leveled also against Socrates (Plato, *Apology* 24B–C).

However, Athenian culture appears to be open to hearing about new things. The philosophers are interested to learn what Paul has to say – regardless of whether they will accept or reject it – so they ask him to explain his “new teaching,” which sounded strange to them. Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with Paul.

Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (from *Lutheran Commentary*)

The Epicureans were a philosophic sect, founded by Epicurus (born in Samos, 342 B. C). “The Epicureans, while admitting the existence of gods, regarded them as paying no attention to men and the affairs of this world. They believed in no providence, in no accountability, in neither reward nor retribution in the life to come. They were virtually atheists. The real teaching of the masters of the sect was, that a man should enjoy to the uttermost the things of this life; for the soul, being material, was annihilated after death.” (Pop. Comm.)

The Stoics were a philosophic sect founded by Zeno, who, a Cyprian by birth, taught at Athens about 300 B. C. “These were pantheists: they denied any overruling providence, or, in fact, any interference on the part of Deity in the

affairs of the world. Everything was governed by an iron destiny, to which ‘God’ Himself was subject. They believed only in the immortality of the soul by imagining it was ultimately absorbed in Deity; but even this absorption they seemed to teach was only to be the lot of the wise and the good.

The ideal life, however, proposed to the disciples of Zeno was a far higher one than the Epicurean ideal; a proud self-denial, and austere apathy (*ἀταραξία*), untouched by human passion, unmoved alike by joy and sorrow, was aimed at by the true Stoic.”

Attridge notes that

Epicureans ridiculed religious enthusiasm and argued against a fear of death and divine judgment.

Stoics urged living in accord with nature, which they understood to be ruled by the divine Logos. In order to achieve this goal, they advocated the importance of reason and self-control.

AMONG THE PHILOSOPHERS (from N. T. Wright, *Acts* (N. T. Wright for Everyone Bible Study Guides), pp. 84-89).

Paul argues in the marketplace, which in Athens was a marketplace of ideas as well as of other commodities. There he met the great philosophical schools of the day, the Epicureans and the Stoics.

The Epicureans held that the world and the gods were a long way away from one another, with little or no communication; the result was that one should get on with life as best one could, discovering how to gain maximum pleasure from a quiet, sedate existence. ... the Epicureans held there is simply not enough evidence for us to be able to tell whether the gods exist or not, and if they do, what if anything they want from us.

The Stoics believed that divinity lay within the present world and within each human being, so that this divine force could be discovered and harnessed; virtue consisted in getting in touch with and living according to this inner divine rationality. ... the Stoics believed that divinity lay within the present world and within each human being.

Luke has shown us how the gospel matches up against two major opponents: the zealous Jews in synagogues around Turkey and now in northern Greece, and the economic and political forces of the Roman Empire. But there is an entire world of thought which we haven’t yet had on stage. This is the hugely important sphere of the prevailing ancient philosophies. They conditioned how thousands of ordinary people saw the world, what they thought of as reasonable and unreasonable, what they thought about the gods, what they thought human life was for and how best you should live it. Millions who had never studied philosophy, who maybe could not even read or write, were nevertheless deeply influenced by the major currents of thought that were debated in the schools, just as plenty of people today who have never studied philosophy or economics are massively influenced by popular media presentations of large and complex ideas.

Both of these philosophies are very different from a Christian understanding of God as being deeply concerned with the affairs of human beings, knowing, for example, the number of hairs on our heads, as well as the expectation of an afterlife. It also differs considerably from the Judeo-Christian idea that we are accountable before God for what we do in life and also the idea that God sometimes intervenes in human affairs. On the other hand, the virtue of self-denial can be seen in the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and in the lives of other saints.

They took Paul to the Areopagus, an intimidating setting but powerful setting, to explain his teachings.



Above: Acropolis from Areopagus; Below: Areopagus; both photos courtesy Wikimedia.



Wright notes that this invitation to speak

was not as friendly and innocuous as it sounds. Athens may have been interested in new ideas, but divinities from elsewhere could easily get you into serious trouble. “Are we permitted to know . . .” (v. 19) also suggests they suspect Paul of being part of a secret group and of having secret doctrines which could be a threat to their state.

William Willimon says about the Athenians, “Their religious yearning, even though a bit of a scandal to a monotheistic Jew, is the inarticulate and uninformed yearning of the pagan for the God whom only the Scriptures can disclose.”

Attridge says that Paul’s speech at Athens is the only major speech in Acts to a pagan audience. Paul’s arguments to the Athenians differ from the types of sermons he makes in synagogues. Rather than speaking about how Jesus fits into the history of Israel, which would have been of no interest to these pagan philosophers, Paul quotes at least one of their own poets.

Although Paul is deeply affronted by the many idols he sees, he takes a very clever approach to the Athenians, describing them as “extremely religious.” This could also mean

superstitious but is probably a positive description, as Attridge notes that “speeches customarily began by praising the audience..”) Paul describes the Athenians in this way because of the many objects of their worship – representations of pagan deities. Attridge refers to this as “a sympathetic critique of idolatry.” Paul especially singles out one item that he has seen, an altar “with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” The precise inscription to which Paul refers is not known, but Attridge says there is evidence of such altars.

From this, Paul appropriates this “unknown god” and identifies it with the “God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth.” This God, Paul tells them, “does not live in shrines made by human hands, 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” (vv. 24-25). Attridge notes that this theme also appears in Stephen’s speech, and that “This philosophically inclined audience would have agreed.” This discourse appears to be a slam at idols – tangible objects representing deities – as a subject of worship.

Paul goes on to tell the Athenians that God made all nations from a single blood, or a single ancestor, which is the story of Genesis. This idea differed from the assumptions of the Athenians and most other nations, which was that they had sprung from the soil of the country in which they lived and were therefore independent of all other humans (*Lutheran Commentary*). Paul argues that God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, allotting times and boundaries for where they would live so that they would search for God, who is not far from each one of us.

Here (v. 28), Paul says, “‘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.’ 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.”

If the quotation “In him we live and move and have our being” is a Greek quotation, “its source is unknown. ‘For we too are his offspring’ is from Aratus (*Phaenomena* 5), a third-century BCE poet (Attridge, *HarperCollins Study Bible*). Ideas of God’s nearness are found in Jewish teaching, for example, Ps 145:18: The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. (NRSV)

Paul makes an argument that builds on God as revealed in nature and also builds on wisdom that would have been familiar to his Athenian philosopher audience. Paul finally gets

around to speaking about Jesus when he says that God has overlooked times of human ignorance but now commands all people to repent and has fixed a day when the world will be judged in righteousness by one God has appointed for this task. At this point, Paul claims that God “has given assurance to all by raising [this man] from the dead.” He promptly loses some of his audience and interrupts his discourse, but as with his speeches in the synagogues, some of his listeners are persuaded or want to hear more.

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Paul’s audience may well have misunderstood his reference to the resurrection as the name of a female deity, who would have been “Jesus’ companion goddess” (Attridge).

Question for discussion: What does Paul’s address to the Athenians suggest to modern Christians about how to speak about our faith to those who do not yet believe?