

# Paul at Athens

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—Acts 17:23***

**WHEN PAUL SUDDENLY** had to leave his newly found brethren of Thessalonica and Berea to escape mob violence and threats to his life brought on by his enemies, he was escorted safely by his friends to a port city where he boarded a ship bound for Athens. As he departed, he left word for both Timothy and Silas, who had stayed

behind in Macedonia, that when their work was finished in Thessalonica and Berea, they were to join him in Athens. (Acts 17:13-15) Although Paul's abrupt departure was from Berea, we know that Timothy went to Thessalonica, as stated in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, while Silas appears to have stayed in Berea. (I Thess. 3:1,2; Acts 17:14) Luke's record indicates that Timothy and Silas, perhaps due to the great amount of work still to be done in Macedonia, did not meet Paul in Athens, as had been planned, but in Corinth, which was to be the next stop on his journey.—Acts 18:1,5

Athens did not appear to be part of Paul's originally arranged journey to search out a people for God's name. He found himself there mainly because persecution had driven him in that direction, and he did not expect to stay any longer than necessary. The Scriptural record, in fact, only mentions this one brief stop in Athens, and no return visit either by Paul or his associates is recorded.

## **A CITY OF IDOLATRY**

Nevertheless, while waiting in Athens for his two colleagues, Paul was not idle. At first, he toured the city, where he saw their many pagan idols. Athens was the most celebrated city in ancient Greece for learning, the arts, science, music, culture, and philosophy. A few centuries before, Alexander the Great had conquered much of the world, helping to establish the powerful Greek Empire. Athens became the most prominent city in the world, and was considered the empire's capital. Now it had yielded that distinction to Rome. However, it still retained its reputation as a great cultural center. Many learned men and philosophers came from Athens, including Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Sophocles, and Demosthenes.

As Paul went through the city, he looked at the temples, altars, and statues, appalled at the idolatry he found. (Acts 17:16) It is said that no matter where anyone would stand in Athens, his eyes would range over innumerable temples, altars, and statues of gods. Athens was a paradox. Of all the cities in the world, it boasted of having the most learned and cultural heritage, and yet it was the most idolatrous. It is unknown as to how many gods the Athenians worshipped. Estimates by historians range from several

hundred to tens of thousands. Regardless of the number, however, it is clearly evident that religion, whether based on theology or mythology, was exploited in stone, silver, and gold.

As Paul walked through the city, he came upon the local synagogue, where he stopped to reason with the Jews. Nothing is written as to whether he found acceptance or opposition from them. It is possible that the Jews there had come considerably under the influence of worldly wisdom, and that he found little in the way of response to true religion. With these Jews, perhaps, it was less a matter of opening the Scriptures, and more that of a debate about the philosophies of that time. Paul also sought out people who were religious, successfully finding them in the marketplace. Since he could speak Greek fluently, Paul could reason effectively with these people, informing them of Jesus and the resurrection. Luke records these meetings, saying that Paul reasoned “in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.”—Acts 17:17

### **PUTTING FORTH “STRANGE GODS”**

Paul’s efforts were not localized nor secretive. Soon men in all parts of Athens had heard of his discussions. The record states that “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.” (vs. 18) Paul was aided in his efforts to spread these glad tidings by the customs of the Athenians, who spent their leisure

time in deliberating over the newest thoughts on philosophy. Luke informs us: “All the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.”—vs. 21

It is believed by some historians that laws had been passed which prohibited the introduction of any more gods in the region, particularly if their origin was not from Greek or Roman philosophy or mythology. Although not so stated in Luke’s account of Paul in Athens, Acts 16:20,21 gives some indication that this may have been the case in Philippi, where earlier Paul and Silas had been put into prison. There, the claim was made by the local authorities that their teachings were “not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, [we] being Romans.”

## **ORIGINS OF ANCIENT GODS**

We may wonder as to the large number of deities that the ancient Greeks, Romans, and other peoples of the world had, and which constituted the basis of the mythology of that era. The pattern among each was similar. Every god or goddess had a different function, but mainly it consisted of control over the natural elements and fundamental aspects of life on the earth. The Greek deities were thought to live on the top of Mount Olympus, or sometimes in the air above it, but they were free to wander about the world at will. Although Zeus was the chief of all their gods, there were many others, some of the more well-known being Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Aphrodite, Athena, and Poseidon.

It is likely that such a multiplicity of gods, and the accompanying mythology, had its origin in the

exploits of the mighty beings that came to earth in the days before the Flood. Some of the angelic creation took on human form and intermarried with the daughters of men, producing a hybrid race which contributed to much evil in the earth. (Gen. 6:1-5) Greek mythology reflects this, speaking of gods coming and going to and from the earth, marrying fair maidens, and producing offspring which performed mighty deeds. The number of deities and the related mythology increased as the events of Noah's day passed down from one generation to another. It is noteworthy that these "strange gods," as they are called in Acts 17:18 and 22 are in the Greek language identified by the word *daimonion*, which is the Greek root of our English word "demon." This is another indication that their mythological worship most likely had its beginning with the fallen angels, or demons, of Noah's day.

## **PAUL BROUGHT BEFORE THE HIGH COURT**

When Paul's preaching relating to the resurrection of Jesus reached the ears of the Epicureans and Stoics, two major groups of philosophers, they decided to bring him before the Aeropagus—the supreme court of Athens. They said of Paul, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange demons." Then they inquired of him, "Can we know what this new doctrine is, which is spoken by thee? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears; we desire, therefore, to know what these things mean."—Acts 17:18-20, *Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott*

It might appear that Paul was merely being asked to explain his teachings. However, if this were

true, they could just as easily have heard him in the marketplace where they encountered him. Their statements about Paul were not complimentary—calling him a “babbler,” meaning a seed-picker, or empty talker. These philosophers also seemed to be skeptical about what he was preaching, even though they had widely differing religious views among themselves, and like most Athenians, worshipped many gods. Thus, Paul’s hearing before them was likely in the nature of a trial, because he had been preaching things to the Athenians which, up to this time, they had never before heard.

The Epicureans believed that the world was made by chance, that there is no providence, no resurrection, no immortality, and that pleasure is the chief good of life. The Stoics, on the other hand, had a philosophy which contended that everything which has reality is natural, and is overruled by divine will to be calmly accepted without passion, grief or joy. In this viewpoint, they defined “force” as the shaping principle that is joined with matter to be the universal influence which pervades all, and becomes the reason and soul of the animate creation.

The proponents of both these philosophies suspected that Paul’s teachings were contrary to theirs when he introduced the idea of the resurrection. If so, they likely thought that the law forbidding the introduction of new gods could be used to prevent him from continuing. We do not know what the penalty would have been if the Aeropagus had decided that Paul was guilty of breaking such a law. Whatever the prospect, he was not in a friendly environment.

## THE “UNKNOWN” GOD

During the time he had traveled in Athens, Paul read many of the inscriptions on the various altars, temples, and statues. He noticed one altar in particular, on which the words, “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD,” had been inscribed. In their concern not to overlook any deity, the Athenians had erected this special altar. It was the existence of this altar to an “unknown god” around which Paul developed his defense.

Standing before the supreme court and a large assembly of Athenians who had gathered on Mars’ Hill, Paul began to speak. Luke describes the scene as follows: “Paul stood in the midst, . . . and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. 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.”—Acts 17:22,23

In the *Diaglott* translation, Paul’s opening words are rendered: “You are extremely devoted to the worship of demons.” Other translations soften this statement by translating the passage, “You are very religious,” or “You are too superstitious.” The Greek word here, however, as in verse 18, has as its root the equivalent of our English word “demon.”

We might think it strange that Paul should be so blunt. If he had been speaking to Jews, they would have been insulted. However, when Paul described the Greeks’ religion as centered in the worship of demons, they understood this to be correct, and therefore were not insulted. The word demon, as translated in its various Greek forms, did not have a bad connotation to the Grecians—it meant “God.”

The noted philosopher Plato used a form of this word which meant “knowing.” It was not until later that Gentiles, through the widespread influence of Christianity, started using this word to denote evil spirits and fallen angels.

## **THE SUPREME CREATOR**

When Paul told those gathered at Mars’ Hill that their unknown God was the one and only true God, he used the Greek word *theos*, a designation of the supreme divinity. As he informed the Athenians about this Supreme Creator of the universe, he made it clear that they could never make a likeness of him from gold, silver, or stone, to place in a temple. They could not create this God with their hands. The reverse, in fact, was true. Paul said, “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; Neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.”—vss. 24,25

This mighty Creator was responsible for all life upon earth in every form, and all life was dependent upon him. They did not have God in their hands—he had them in his hands. Paul said this Supreme God “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: 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: For in him we live, and move, and have our being.” Even some of the Greeks’ own poets, Paul said, spoke in this fashion, believing that we are all God’s offspring.—vss. 26-28



We marvel at the great tact and logic of Paul in presenting his case, and how well he used the teachings of some of their own respected writers, building upon them the structure of God's plan. Being God's offspring, Paul reasoned with them, no one of mankind could make gold, silver, or stone sculptures or images to look like God, or to worship as God.—Acts. 17:29

### **JUDGMENT DAY APPOINTED**

As Paul stood before the supreme court of Athens, he reminded his listeners that in times past God overlooked such misunderstandings of his nature and character. However, the light of truth shone more brightly now. Man should repent, Paul said, change from his superstitious beliefs in many gods, and devote himself fully to the worship and obedience of the one true God. As he was coming under the judgment of their court, Paul stated that God "hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness," and has selected his own judge for this task. Paul said that God had "given assurance unto all men" of this "in that he raised [Jesus] from the dead."—vss. 30,31

Immediately at Paul's mention of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, many of his listeners began deriding him in such a loud manner that he could no longer be heard. Others indicated that they would like to hear more at a later time. As for the court, it was not necessary for them to hear more of his defense. He had made it clear that he was not introducing a new god, but rather was speaking about one they already worshipped as the Unknown God. Thus, he was free to go. "So Paul departed from among them."—vss. 32,33

## **SMALL ECCLESIA FORMED**

Although Athens was not a place Paul had planned to visit, the Lord overruled circumstances to take him there, and his trial helped to put him in contact with several who became believers in the Gospel. Only two of these are named, and their names appear only once in the Scriptures. One was “Dionysius the Aeropagite.” Because of this designation, it is thought that he was one of the judges in front of whom Paul made his defense. The other individual mentioned was “a woman named Damaris,” of whom no additional information is given. These and “others with them,” as the account states, adhered to Paul and likely became the nucleus of a small congregation of the Lord’s people in Athens.—vs. 34

How often God has shaped circumstances in the lives of individuals such as Paul to bring the Gospel message to those—one here and one there—who have a hearing ear. Likewise, the Lord overrules in the lives of those who desire to follow and serve him, so they can hear his Word and be brought into the body of Christ.

We might initially think of Paul’s time in Athens as a “detour” in his journey. However, the Lord knew in advance that there were a few there who were waiting to learn about God’s plan, and of the great opportunity which would be given to Paul to give a witness in the midst of the world’s most renown cultural and religious center of that time. We can manifestly see in these events how the body of Christ was being selected, and how it was growing through the faithfulness of Paul and the many laborers associated with him in this search for God’s people. ■