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SPEAKER, AUDIENCE, AND TIME IN THE AREOPAGUS SPEECH (ACTS 17:16-34)

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY

BY
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ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
2011

APPROVAL SHEET

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(ACTS 17:16-34)

BY

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY

GRADUATION DATE MAY 20 2011

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ABSTRACT

Luke's description of Paul's Areopagus address, Acts 17:16-34, represents a unique situation in the spread of the gospel. Paul's activity in Athens and Lystra (Acts 14) represent the first Christian approaches to a fully pagan audience. Luke's representation of Paul's speech includes several unique elements: Paul does not cite Scripture, does not refer to Jesus by name, uses phrases similar to those employed by pagan philosophers, and even makes use of a direct quote from a pagan poet. The speech is clearly relevant to apologetics, providing a biblical example for approaching a particular audience with the gospel.

What exactly is Paul's method in Athens? How does Luke depict it? This paper proposes that, along with standard analysis of the grammar and syntax of the passage itself, Luke's characterization of speaker, audience, and time in the Acts narrative must be considered in order to provide a contextual nexus within which the speech can be understood. These characterizations by no means exhaust the important contextual elements related to this passage, but are critical to afford a basic background for understanding the speech, and they establish the proper boundaries for understanding the message of the speech. This paper will conclude that Luke represents Paul as consistent in his message, preaching "Jesus and the resurrection" in Athens as he did everywhere else. However, according to Luke, Paul is also willing to find the best way to approach the particular audience to which he speaks. This characteristic of Paul is found throughout the Acts narrative, and, in fact, in the letters of Paul himself. In Acts 17, Luke

describes how the idolatry of the Athenians presents a unique situation. Unable to appeal to Scripture, Paul chooses at Athens to focus on idolatry. The practice of idolatry simultaneously reveals a natural capacity to know God which is common to all men, and the corruption of that capacity. Paul then points to repentance as the proper response to God's condemnation of idolatry. Paul is therefore entirely consistent with regard to the content of his message, but flexible with regard to method in making it known. A detailed consideration of Luke's characterization of speaker, audience, and time show how Paul faithfully and carefully presents the Christian gospel in a unique situation.

Two uses of this passage will then be examined by way of negative example. James Barr's use of this passage in his *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* will be examined along with that of Cornelius Van Til in his booklet *Paul at Athens*. These two works exemplify how failure to consider Luke's characterization of speaker, audience, and time lead to exegetical conclusions unwarranted by the text.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Greg Perry for his gracious supervision of this thesis. Throughout the process he pointed me in several good directions, headed me off from several bad ones, and provided needed stylistic corrections as well. I would also like to thank Dr. Hans Bayer for suggesting many improvements. The time that these two professors spent reading and correcting mistakes was of great value to me.

Introduction

Apologetic adjustment is an area of permanent Christian interest. How are Christians to present the gospel effectively in various contexts? At what point does the attempt to state the Christian message in terms comprehensible to a particular audience become accommodation to sinful thought and practice? What background knowledge must a person or a people possess in order to effectively receive the Christian gospel? Can the preacher or apologist assume common knowledge of God among all men? Whether asserted or assumed, answers to these and other similar questions form the basis of the apologetic enterprise, determining the methods, and inevitably the outcome, of the gospel mission.

These questions are not new; the church has long debated over proper apologetic method. Justin Martyr continued to wear his philosopher's gown following his conversion, often representing pagan thought as a confused shadow of Christian revelation, and using pagan doctrine as an introduction to Christian apologetics. Tertullian famously rejected all connection between Jerusalem and Athens. St. Basil believed some of the pagan poets and philosophers to be good preparation for Scripture. St. Thomas Aquinas extensively used the pagans writers in his apologetic work.[1]

[1]This brief list is not meant to oversimplify the thought of any of these churchmen. Some of Justin's writing about pagan thought looks just as if it came from Tertullian (see, for example, the *Discourse to the Greeks*). St. Basil labored to make a distinction in pagan writings that were helpful and those which were not, and clearly believed Scripture to be superior to any of these (*Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*). St. Thomas repeatedly asserts the superiority of divine revelation (see, for example, *Super Boethium De Trinitate*).

The difficulty of apologetic adjustment is, if anything, more acute in the modern church. Christians find themselves in a missionary situation, not merely in remote areas, but in places traditionally under the aegis of the church. Christians now witness to peoples having little or no background in the Scriptures, despite the church's historic presence where they live. Academic works dealing with apologetics often devote significant amounts of material to epistemology in an effort to demonstrate how much (or how little) the gospel relates to man's natural thinking. On a personal level, private Christians seeking to commend Christ to coworkers, neighbors, and friends ask the same types of questions as the professional theologians, or at least assume answers to such questions. Christians naturally look to the Scriptures for guidance in such areas, but how do the Scriptures address these issues?

Paul's speech to the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34) provides significant insight into the question of apologetic adjustment. In this passage Luke describes Paul's reason for being in Athens (an almost wholly pagan city), his anger at its rampant idolatry, his arguments in the marketplace and subsequent address to the Areopagus council, and the success of his appeal for repentance. Paul's address as related by Luke bears a number of idiosyncratic features. In his speech Paul makes no explicit reference to Scripture. The phrases he uses in speaking to the Athenians sound very similar to those used by pagan philosophers in their attempts to describe God and the world. Paul seems to indicate that man has by nature at least some natural knowledge of God. Finally, Luke does not represent Paul as using the name of Jesus anywhere in this speech.

Exegetes have come to a number of widely divergent conclusions regarding this passage. M. Dibelius called the speech "a *hellenistic* speech,"[2] implying that the basis for Paul's argument could be found in the realm of Greek thought. B. Gärtner's monograph *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* makes a case for Paul's speech being in the line of Jewish Diaspora apologetics.[3] The speech has also been used as *prima facie* evidence that the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the letters are incompatible with one another, and that one of them is therefore unhistorical. Perhaps due to the immensity of the issues involved, an enormous amount of commentary and literature have been produced centering on this pericope.

This paper includes a commentary and brief exegesis of the passage emphasizing Luke's *characterization of speaker, audience, and time* as they are found within the Acts narrative. A short examination of secondary literature will show that Luke's characterization of speaker and audience are consistent with those of other authors. These three contextual factors, while not providing all of the necessary context, nevertheless provide significant shape to the way in which the speech is meant to be understood. Luke intends that his readers read the speech at Athens with a full understanding of who Paul is, as he is consistently described throughout Acts. Luke's portrayal of Paul, along with the description of the Athenian audience, and the specific time in which the speech takes place, provides boundaries for understanding the more difficult elements of the speech. Luke characterizes Paul as consistent in his message, yet able to adapt to particular circumstances. His audience in Athens has no background in the Scriptures, therefore Paul focuses on idolatry. Idolatry indicates a capacity to know

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[2]Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Mary Ling (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1956), 57.
[3]B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, trans. Carolyn Hannay King (Uppsala: C.W.K Gleerup, 1955).

God that is common to all men, while at the same time showing the corruption of that capacity. Luke's indication of the change in redemptive era highlights *repentance* as the focus of Paul's speech. Following a detailed examination of these three elements, two significantly different uses of this passage will then be examined, and it will be shown that failure to consider Luke's characterization of speaker, audience, and time leads to erroneous conclusions about the text.

Translation

Acts 17:16-34

17:16) Now while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was provoked[4] within him as he saw [that][5] the city was[6] full of idols. 17) Therefore he dialogued[7] with the Jews and the God-fearers[8] in the synagogue, and in the marketplace every day with those

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[4]Παρωξύνετο is imperfect; while the translation here is closer to English simple past ("was provoked" instead of "was being provoked"), the notion that this action is not complete and ongoing during the period of time specified is carried over from the surrounding clauses. His spirit was provoked *during the time* ("while") he was in Athens, *each time* or *when* ("as") he saw the idolatry of the city. Therefore this translation faithfully carries over the imperfective notion of the verb, even though it does not technically comply.

[5]"That" is not in the text, but is necessary in English to prepare reader for complex accusative (κατείδωλον οὖσαν τὴν πόλιν). See also ESV and NIV ("that the city was full of idols"). NASB does not include "that" but has "was observing the city full of idols" - this is technically closer to the Greek text but is slightly ambiguous in English; the clause "full of idols" is not simply an adjective describing the city but is the primary cause of Paul's distress. See also note 3 on indirect discourse, and the comparison of Greek and English usage in Wallace on 538.

[6]Wallace notes that "an anarthrous participle in the accusative case, in conjunction with an accusative noun or pronoun sometimes indicates indirect discourse after a verb of perception or communication" (p. 645). Further, "the participle of indirect discourse retains the tense of the direct discourse" (p. 646) – this is unlike English which uses a different tense form in indirect discourse (see Wallace 538 for comparison of Greek and English indirect discourse). Therefore, though οὖσαν is the present participle of εἰμι, the past tense is used in this translation to indicate indirect discourse.

[7]Διαλέγομαι also imperfect (see note 1) but here rendered in simple past because in English narrative simple past is used to represent an ongoing or incompleted action within a particular time frame when the time frame is marked elsewhere in the narrative. That is to say, the actions in v. 17 are governed by the time set in v. 16 ("while Paul was waiting for them in Athens"); further, the ongoing nature of this action is specified later in v. 17 as it is made clear that this action was done κατὰ πᾶσαν ἡμέραν. The English phrase "Therefore he was discussing" (the most direct translation from the Greek) creates a slight problem, as in English the imperfect would be used in a narrative to introduce a particular sub-scene in a larger narrative (e.g., "therefore he was discussing *on a particular occasion, when x happened*" or "therefore he was discussing *in a particular place, when x entered*"). Repeatedly rendering the Greek imperfect as English imperfect in the narrative gives the English reader a feeling that fresh scenes are being constantly introduced. The simple past keeps the flow of the narrative without sacrificing the aspect of the verb in the context of the overall narrative (not merely the sentence). "Discussed" in English implies a clear topic; "argued" seems to have a negative connotation unnecessary in this context.

[8]Rendering this with a hyphenated noun and a footnote explaining the category helps the reader to understand the specific group that is being discussed. ESV "devout persons" seems too general; "God-fearing Gentile" (NASB) and "God-fearing Greeks" (NIV) seem better but do not closely relate the group to Judaism, as seems indicated by the NT term.

who happened to be there. [18] And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers conversed[9] with him, and some said, "What ever might this scavenger[10] desire[11] to say?" and others[12], "He seems to be [a] preacher of foreign divinities," because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. [19] And taking hold of him they led [him] to the Areopagus saying, "May we know[13] what this new teaching [is][of which] you speak? [20] For you bring some strange [things] to our ears. We desire therefore to know what these things mean[14]." [21] Now all the Athenians and the foreigners[15] who lived there spent their time for nothing other than to speak or to hear the newest thing[16]. [22] And Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, "Men of Athens, I see [that] you are very religious[17] in everything. [23] For while I passed through and was examining your objects of worship,[18] I even found an altar on which had been inscribed[19]: 'To an[20] unknown god.'

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[9]Also imperfect; see notes 1 and 4

[10]Lit. "seed-picker"; mostly rendered "babbler," likely in deference to KJV (see also ESV, NASB, NIV, TNIV, RSV; TEV has "ignorant show-off"). "Scavenger" seems to get at the idea of one who cobbles together a system of thought from the leavings of other systems. Perhaps "intellectual pigeon"; NJB has "parrot," which also seems good.

[11]"Potential optative" - Wallace notes that "this use of the optative occurs with the particle ἄν in the apodosis of an incomplete fourth class condition" (p. 483). Use of the optative represents a classicism, a distinct feature of Luke's writings (cf. C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* 2 vols. International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994-1998), 2:830. With the protasis explicitly stated, this would be something like, "If he was allowed to speak, what would he say?" "Might . . . desire" here describes the potential nature of this question.

[12]Τινες ἔλεγον . . . οἱ δέ

[13]Lit. "Are we able to know . . . ?"

[14]Τίνα θέλει ταῦτα εἶναι seemingly a classicism; it is found three times in Luke (BDAG cites here, Acts 2:12, and Luke 15:26) - LS note this usage under ἐθέλω.

[15]More literally, "strangers"; however, "stranger" has a somewhat different connotation in English, and "foreigners" better gets across the idea of "those who are not native to Athens, but have moved there from another place." ESV and NIV also have "foreigners."

[16]Strict translation of the comparative would be "something newer"; however, this might be best translated as superlative, "the newest thing," as this matches a closely related English idiom. ESV and NASB have "something new"; NIV "the latest ideas"; KJV "some new thing."

[17]Wallace says that this is an example of a "comparative adjective used with an elative sense" (p. 300). This means that the "quality expressed by the adjective is intensified, but not making a comparison" (p. 300). ESV, NASB, NIV, TEV all translate as "very religious"; KJV translates as a (negative) comparison: "too superstitious."

[18]As F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 180, and ESV, NIV, NASB (but this phrase seems inadequate). KJV

What therefore you worship as unknown[21], this I proclaim to you. [24] The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made by [human] hands, [25] nor is he served by human hands, [as if] needing[22] anything; he himself [is] the one who gives to all life and breath and everything. [26] And he made out of one[23] man all the nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, determining [the] times [which] have been prescribed and the fixed boundaries of their dwelling place, [27] [that they would][24] seek God, if perhaps[25] they might indeed feel about[26] for him and might find [him], and indeed he is not far from each one of us. [28] For in him we live and move and are, as also some of your own poets have spoken, 'For we are also his offspring[27].' [29] Being therefore the offspring of God, we ought not to think the divine being[28] to be like gold or silver or stone, an image of the skill and thought of man. [30] Therefore previously[29] God overlooked the times of ignorance, [but] now he commands all men everywhere to repent, [31] because he has set a day on which he intends to judge

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has "your devotions"; a very different meaning in modern usage.

[19]ESV, NASB, NIV, and KJV all have this as a substantive, "with this inscription."

[20]No article in the text (and no textual variants listed by NA[27]), but ESV and KJV have "the" while NIV and NASB have "an."

[21]"Ignorantly" would be most succinct here, but modern context views this word as having a connotation of insult, and modern readers might read Paul as insulting the Athenians, whereas in fact the evidence in the rest of the passage seems to indicate that Paul goes out of his way to be particularly polite.

[22]Participle is conditional in this instance.

[23]ESV "out of one man"; NASB and NIV "from one man"; KJV "out of one blood" (due to textual variant) – the text simply has ἐξ ἑνὸς.

[24]Ζητεῖν is here an infinitive of purpose.

[25]Wallace notes this as example of fourth class condition ("less probable future") using εἰ + optative in protasis – Wallace says that due to the choice of subjunctive in Koine, this usage is deliberate on the part of the author (p. 700).

[26]Wallace notes this verb ψηλαφήσειαν (and the following verb εὕροιεν) as "consummative" aorist (both verbs are optative mood), stressing "the cessation of an act or state" (p. 559-61). Also, "conditional optative"; Wallace says that this shows a "possible condition in the future, usually a remote possibility," and that this is a rare usage (p. 484).

[27]NASB has "children."

[28]NASB has "Divine Nature"; KJV has "Godhead."

[29]ESV does not translate μέν ουν; NIV has "In the past" - it seems that something needs to be here to show the contrast between how God dealt with this situation *previously*, and how he is *now* going to deal with it, as is implied both in the syntax and the contextual meaning of the sentence.

the world in righteousness, by a man whom he appointed, showing proof to all by raising him from the dead." 32) But when they heard [of] resurrection from the dead, some mocked, but others[30] said, "We will hear from you also again concerning this." 33) So Paul went out from their midst. 34) And some men believed, being joined to him, among whom also [were] Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

[30]Use of the article as "alternative personal pronoun" (Wallace, 212-13) – this usage is marked by μέν and δέ (which Wallace says "are almost always present," 212, as here) and implies a contrast.

Exegetical Background

Author, Audience, and Purpose

The book of Acts does not explicitly identify its author. Acts is clearly related to the third Gospel,[31] and both of these books were attributed to Luke the Evangelist from the earliest times. By the late second century the book of Acts is widely attributed to Luke. F.F. Bruce points out attestation in the Anti-Marcionite Prologue, the Muratorian fragment, and Irenaeus, all from the late second century. In fact, the external evidence attributing the book of Acts to Luke is unanimous.[32] Carson and Moo say that "Luke's authorship of the two books [the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts] went virtually unchallenged until the onset of critical approaches to the New Testament at the end of the eighteenth century"[33] Bruce says "suffice it to say that, from the second century on, the consistent witness of all who write on the subject is that the author of the two volumes *Ad Theophilum* . . . was one and the same person, and that his name was Luke."[34] Modern studies denying Lukan authorship do so based on the fact that Acts contains no reference to Paul's letters (as might be expected from a close companion of Paul), and the fact that no clear citations from Acts are found prior to the Muratorian fragment, Irenaeus, and

[31]Compare Acts 1:1 to Luke 1:1-4; also, the Gospel of Luke ends exactly in the place identified in the Acts preamble (Acts 1:2, "until the day he was taken up").

[32]"From about AD 200 the tradition presents (until it is confronted with internal evidence) no problem." Barrett, 2:30.

[33]D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 291. Carson and Moo go on to state and refute the major arguments against Lukan authorship, pp 290-296.

[34]F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 2-3. Bruce also notes some of the ancient evidence attributing authorship to Luke.

Marcion in the second century. However, the tradition in terms of external evidence for the authorship of Luke is long, varied, and continuous; all the evidence points to Luke as the author of Acts.

The type of book Luke sets out to write is closely related to his audience and purpose for writing. While Luke does not explicitly identify himself as the author, he does clearly identify his audience: the man named Theophilus. Both in the preface to his Gospel (Luke 1:3) and in the preface to the Acts (1:1) Luke identifies Theophilus by name.[35] Witherington points out several important likely characteristics of Theophilus: that he was familiar with Judaism in some measure, but more importantly, that he was likely a Christian already made, but who needed further instruction.[36] This is in line with Luke 1:4, where Luke writes that his purpose is "that you may have assurance concerning the things you have been taught." There seems to be no reason to deny this statement carrying over to Acts as well.

Luke's purpose (to give "assurance concerning the things you have been taught," Luke 1:4) is directly related to his audience (Theophilus, a believing Christian in need of further assurance, Luke 1:4). In order to provide Theophilus with "assurance," Luke produces a work that is clearly anchored to historical reality. Bruce says that "the prime purpose of the twofold work [Luke and Acts], according to the prologue, is to supply trustworthy information about the beginnings of Christianity."[37] Witherington likewise

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[35]That this should be taken as an actual person and not a symbolic name, see Bruce, and also I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980). Some note the possibility that Theophilus was Luke's patron.

[36]Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 64.

[37]Bruce, 22.

concludes that Acts is part of "some sort of two-volume historiographical work."[38] By writing a *historical* work, Luke wants Theophilus to know that the things which he has already been taught (presumably, the basics of Christian belief) are factual, historical events which were witnessed by real people. Luke purposefully writes history, but this does not limit the scope and focus of his work to mere chronology. Commentators note a number of emphases in Acts, and suggest that Luke described theological, apologetic, and social themes as part of his overall goal of providing assurance to a relatively uninstructed Christian.[39]

Luke provides assurance by giving an historical account of the spread of Christianity. Throughout the Acts narrative, Luke shows how the Christian message relates to, is distinct from, and is superior to, other claimants for truth. As the church spreads throughout the Roman Empire of the first century, Luke chronicles the many instances in which the Christian message comes into contact with other thought structures. From the Diaspora Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2) to the high Sadducees (Acts 4-5) to the "God-fearers" (Acts 10, 15), and even to Gentiles without any knowledge of Judaism (Acts 17), Luke shows how the Christian message relates to different groups and their customs of thought. Throughout, the message of the gospel is shown to be superior, not necessarily because it wins the greatest number of converts, but because it is true in relation to the falsehood of the other worldviews.

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[38]Witherington, 21.

[39]See, e.g., Marshall, who notes five distinct theological emphases: "the continuation of God's purpose in history" (p. 23); "the mission and the message" (p. 25); "progress despite opposition" (p. 27); "the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God" (p. 29); "the life and organization of the church" (p. 32) - other authors note Luke's emphasis on the Holy Spirit (e.g., Bruce, 24; L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles,* Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 14.)

The pericope Acts 17:16-34 reveals an important part of this overall theme. Paul's speech to the Areopagus is given entirely to pagans who had no background in the Jewish culture or scriptures. Relating this to Luke's overall purpose is crucial; Luke here provides "assurance" that the Christian message is able to contend with forms of thought outside of Judaism. In fact, Luke shows that people were converted to Christianity based on this speech; *no* background in Judaism was necessary for their conversion at all. Luke shows exactly how Paul was able to remain consistent in his loyalty to Christ, while effectively making his message known in a variety of circumstances.

Date and Canonicity

The date of composition for Acts is debated, albeit within a small range.[40] Barrett says that "early second century evidence for the existence of Acts is scanty and uncertain, but it should not be inferred that the book was not written before the middle of that century. There is evidence enough to prove that it was known by then, and not as a recently produced work."[41] Bruce gives a date "in the late 70s or early 80s."[42] Marshall dates the book around 70.[43] This evidence points to circa 70 AD as the best conjecture for the date of the writing of Acts.

Bruce says that "by the end of the second century the right of Acts to a place in the canon of sacred Scripture was well established"[44] and cites the Muratorian fragment as evidence. Further, Bruce notes the importance of Acts as providing a "link"[45] between

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[40]Carson and Moo note that "most scholars locate Acts in one of three periods of time within this range: 62-70, 80-95, or 115-130 (Carson and Moo, 296.)
[41]Barrett, 1:48.
[42]Bruce, 18.
[43]Marshall, 48.
[44]Bruce, 19.
[45]Ibid.

the separate compilations of the Gospels and the Pauline corpus, especially in light of the Marcionite controversy. Barrett gives an extensive list of citations and early references to Acts[46] and notes as well the part of Acts in the controversy with Marcion. Acts is included in Athanasius' Festal Letter for 367 (Letter XXXIX). The book of Acts was therefore accepted as canonical very early.[47]

Text Critical Analysis

The book of Acts shows a very large amount of textual variation. The text families attest to what are in effect "two distinct forms"[48] of the book of Acts: the Alexandrian and the Western. The Alexandrian form has long-standing precedence (Metzger says that it "has been traditionally regarded as the authentic text of Acts"[49]), and in fact, the text of the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament continues to reflect the view that the Alexandrian tradition is superior to the Western.[50] The Alexandrian text is shorter overall and usually (but not always) represents the shortest reading in any given instance. The primary representative of the Western text is Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis (D)[51], and a comparison of the text of D with NA[27] will show how often the UBS committee chose against the Western tradition (even in the case of the so-

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[46]Barrett, 1:30-48.

[47]Note, however, the discussion of the Western variants in the text of Acts. This discussion often centers around the copyists of the text, and the latitude they felt towards copying the text. The variants in the text, some believe, reflect a "broad view" towards the notion of the canonicity of Acts on the part of the scribes.

[48]Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 222.

[49]Metzger, 222.

[50]Metzger notes the UBS committee's approach to the text of Acts: "in its work of editing that book the United Bible Societies Committee proceeded in an eclectic fashion, judging that neither the Alexandrian nor the Western group of witnesses always preserves the original text . . . . In reviewing the work of the Committee on the book of Acts as a whole, one observes that more often than not the shorter, Alexandrian text was preferred" (p. 235).

[51]Though many scholars note the peculiarity of D even within the Western tradition (see, e.g., Metzger, Parker, and Strange).

called "non-Western interpolations"; compare Luke 24 for the bulk of these). However, the large *amount* of textual variation is somewhat misleading; most of the variants are due to peculiarities in D, a famously aberrant text.

The overall characteristic of the Western text (as represented by D) seems to be an attempt to clarify the text (Metzger notes that "the chief characteristic of Western readings is fondness for paraphrase"[52]). Often an article or a pronoun is inserted in order to make the text more clear. The *nomina sacra* are emphasized, and sometimes "pious phrases" are introduced. All of these add up to a Western text which is nearly 10% longer than the Alexandrian (Metzger more precisely notes 8 ½ % longer). Metzger notes nine theories attempting to describe the relationship between the Alexandrian and Western texts, and several studies have attempted to show various "tendencies" within the Western text (see, e.g., E.J. Epp *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts*,[53] in which Epp contends for a theological bias or an "anti-Judaic" tendency in D).

The pericope Acts 17:16-34 is a representative cross-section of the text problems in Acts as a whole. The "smoothing" or clarifying tendency is clearly seen as articles, prepositions, pronouns, and particles are added, removed, or changed in order to produce a smoother text (see, e.g., v. 18, 21, 27, and 31). The word order is often changed (v. 19, 31). Jesus is explicitly identified in D, but not in other text families (v. 31). Some parsings are changed to allow for better apparent agreement or to clearly identify subject or object (see θεωροῦντι in v. 16), and sometimes words or phrases are added in an attempt to make aspects of the text more specific (e.g. αἵματος in v. 26). Finally, the

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[52]Metzger, 5*. See Metzger's explanation of Haenchen's assessment of "three kinds or levels of variant readings" (p. 233) – these include minor variations to smooth the reading of the text, the introduction of "pious phrases," textual additions from a reviser, and other variants particular to D.

[53]E.J. Epp, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1966).

Western text variants in this pericope also provide *prima facie* evidence for the argument that D represents a tendentious text.[54]

The majority of the important variants in this passage (as in the text of Acts as a whole) are often discussed in relation to the manuscript D and the related Western text family. Even with these variations the bulk of the text and its meaning are relatively stable; they are close enough that some have proposed that the two text traditions represent preliminary and final drafts from the same hand. It should be noted, however, that even an informal comparison of the text of D with that of NA^{27} reveals at least fifty (50) variants in the text (the great majority of these are minor). The variants of any significance for this pericope are noted above.[55]

Narrative Background

Paul began his second missionary journey as related in Acts 15:36: "Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." Following a disagreement regarding John Mark, the two split up; Paul took Silas as his companion and left (Acts 15:40). Consequently the pair traveled through "Syria and Cilicia" (15:41) to established churches, especially noting for them the decisions made by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (recorded in Acts 15).

However, the focus of the mission changed abruptly. Paul had a vision (16:9) which he interpreted as a need for help in the region of Macedonia (16:10). Paul and Silas crossed from Troas to Macedonia via the sea route. Apparently Luke joined Paul in

[54]See the discussion of the insertion of ταύτης in E.J. Epp and the replacement of καὶ γυνὴ ονόματι Δάμαρις by the single word εὐσκήμων in v. 34.

[55]Metzger more fully discusses the unique textual problems presented by the book of Acts, 222-236.

Troas, as the personal pronoun "we" shows up for the first time in Acts in chapter 16. When Paul and Silas are arrested in Philippi the pronoun reverts to "they"; apparently Luke remained in Philippi while Paul moved on to Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. In Macedonia Paul immediately begins to teach and preach, with some results (conversions are noted in Philippi (16:14-15, 30-34), Thessalonica (17:4), and Berea (17:12)). The success of the mission is, however, attended by constant conflict: Paul and Silas are attacked and arrested in Philippi (16:22-24), threatened by a mob in Thessalonica (17:5), and further threatened in Berea (17:13).

The riot in Berea led Paul's friends to quickly remove him from that town and to send him by sea to Athens (17:14-15). Paul therefore comes to Athens in a somewhat accidental way. Stonehouse says that "Paul had come to Athens with the purpose of finding a brief respite from the arduous experiences and the perils of his activity in Macedonia,"[56] noting further that Corinth was Paul's ultimate destination, and that Paul "did not anticipate the activity"[57] which took place at Athens. Barrett likewise notes that "at first Paul occupied himself simply in observation of the city in which he found himself and did not immediately begin his mission."[58] Gray likewise notes that "Paul finds himself in Athens almost by accident."[59]

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[56]N.B. Stonehouse, *The Areopagus Address* (London: Tyndale House, 1949), 9.
[57]Ibid., 10.
[58]Barrett, 2:827.
[59]Patrick Gray, "Implied Audiences in the Areopagus Narrative," *Tyndale Bulletin* 55.2 (2004): 207.

Commentary

Commentary

Verse 16 – ἐκδεχομένου αὐτοὺς indicates a pause or break in Paul's activity: "while he was waiting for them." "Them" here refers to Silas and Timothy (v. 15).[60] At the time of Paul's visit, Athens[61] was in decline; a once great city, well known for its intellectual brilliance, Athens now maintained only a shadow of its former glory.[62] The following verses further describe the city and its inhabitants.

Paul's spirit was παρωξύνετο . . . ἐν αὐτῷ; almost "galled . . . within him." Stonehouse notes that παραξύνομαι "is frequently used in the LXX where the Lord is described as being provoked to anger at the idolatry of His people."[63] It is found in Deut. 9:19 describing God's reaction to the golden calf at Sinai. This linguistic and thematic connection to the OT is significant; it is the first of many threads linking this narrative and speech to the OT. Barrett also notes the connection made here between Paul's reaction and God's hatred of idolatry in the OT.[64]

The reason for Paul's distress is given in the final clause of the verse, θεωροῦντες κατείδωλον οὖσαν τὴν πολιν, "as he saw that the city was full of idols." Stonehouse notes that Paul was certainly familiar with idolatry in other cities; it was the "excessive

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[60]Barrett notes that the textual variants in D (αὐτοῦ τοῦ Παύλου for αὐτοὺς τοῦ Παυλοῦ) likely due to the chronological complication provided by I Thess. 3:1, which seems to indicate that Timothy was with Paul at some point in Athens.

[61]"Athens" is plural in the text; Liddell & Scott says that the designation is "used in pl., because it consisted of several parts" (p. 17).

[62]See Barrett 826-27; Stonehouse 10; and especially Blaiklock 176-79.

[63]Stonehouse, 11.

[64]Barrett, 2:827.

zeal of Athens"[65] with regard to idols that was so provoking to Paul. Athens was not merely idolatrous; it was κατείδωλον, "full of idols." Many commentators describe the Athenian *agora* (or central business district) at that time as being crowded with idols.[66] Luke introduced Paul's gospel ministry to pagans in Acts 14:4-18, where Paul and Barnabas preach at Lystra. In that chapter Luke made clear that Jesus' witnesses have now entered new territory; they have left Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and are going "to the ends of the earth."[67] Paul's witness to pagans continues in Athens.

Verse 17 – Paul's anger, instigated by the intense idolatry of the Athenians, leads him to action (regardless of what his initial intentions of a break): he begins immediately to converse in the Athenian synagogue, as well as in the Athenian *agora*. Although the sentence gives no specific indication of the relative time of these two actions, it is framed in accordance with Paul's usual pattern (and Luke's usual representation) of going first to the synagogue.[68] Paul is willing to speak with anyone who will interact with him; many commentators see in this an echo of Socrates: "πρὸς τοὺς παρατυγχάνοντας recalls Socrates' readiness to converse with anyone willing to converse with him."[69]

Verse 18 – Luke identifies more particularly some of those who debated with Paul; along with "those who happened to be there" Luke also mentions "Epicurean and Stoic philosophers." These last were at least interested enough in Paul's teaching to ask him to

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[65]Stonehouse, 11.
[66]See especially Marshall, 283, who describes the "vast numbers of images of Hermes all over the city and especially at the entrance to the *agora*."
[67]Acts 1:8.
[68]As in Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10.
[69]Barrett, 2:829. Many have developed this theme at length. The close affinity of the content of Paul's speech and the Athenian setting to the Socratic dialogues was noted early by Justin Martyr (*II Apology X*); see also the article "Paul and Socrates" by K.O. Sandnes which analyzes Paul's Areopagus speech in terms of Socratic method.

expound it more fully. The Epicurean and Stoic schools are amply described in most commentaries, but perhaps the classical scholar Blaiklock gives the fullest and best brief description.[70] He notes that these two schools of philosophy were the controlling parties in the Areopagus council,[71] and that they were rivals. Witherington notes that both of these groups "had subsidized teaching chairs in Athens at this time";[72] likewise Johnson.[73] Briefly, the Epicureans were functional materialists, believing in the existence of gods who were utterly remote and indifferent to humanity. What were viewed as the horrible, difficult fluctuations of life led to "Epicurus' passionate quest for peace of mind."[74] Blaiklock notes the false classification of Epicureans as hedonists, but it nevertheless remains true that the Epicureans primarily sought "a life of tranquility (*ataraxia*), free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears (including in particular the fear of death)."[75] Barrett briefly summarizes Stoic belief: "The Stoics believed that the human race was one, proceeding as it did from a single point of origin, that there was a divine being . . . conceived in pantheistic rather than personal terms . . . and that it was man's duty to seek and to live in accordance with this indwelling god."[76] The Stoics sought to suppress and control the volatile passions through the exercise of duty and virtue.[77]

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[70]Blaiklock, E.M. "The Areopagus Address." The Third Rendle Short Memorial Lecture, sponsored by the Bristol Library for Biblical Research, delivered at the University of Bristol, June 5, 1964. 180-86.
[71]Ibid., 180. See below, v. 19, for description of this council.
[72]Witherington, 514.
[73]Johnson, 313. The ancient source for this information is Lucian, the 2nd century Greek satirist, in his work *The Eunuch*, part 3: Συντέτακται μέν, ὦ Πάμφιλε, ὡς ὅισθα, ἐκ βασιλέως μισθοφορά τις οὐ φαύλη κατά γένη τοῖς φιλοσόφοις, Στωϊκοῖς λέγω καὶ Πλατωνικοῖς καὶ Ἐπικουρείοις, ἔτι δὲ καὶ τοῖς ἐκ τοῦ Περιπάτου, τὰ ἴσα τούτοις ἅπασιν.
[74]Blaiklock, 181.
[75]F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 330-31.
[76]Barrett, 2:829.
[77]Blaiklock's description represents the Stoic school as superior to that of the Epicureans.

Paul's initial teaching made at least some impact with these groups; they make an effort to understand his message. Σπερμολὸγος is difficult to translate in a way which allows for all of its connotation. Barrett says that "literally it means *picking up seeds*, and so came to be used of an inferior speaker or writer who picks up and uses as his own ideas that he has found in others."[78] Witherington says that the "term is based on the image of a bird which picks up and drops seeds . . . it came to connote someone who was a conveyor of snippets of knowledge or philosophy or religious ideas . . . in short a dilettante."[79] Blaiklock notes that "the word was Athenian slang . . . In Athenian vernacular it came to mean the sophistic picker-up of scraps of learning."[80] Luke's use of the word testifies in some measure to the veracity of his account in recreating the Athenian scene. "Scavenger" is used in this translation; perhaps "intellectual pigeon" or even "pigeon" might begin to capture the element of derogatory slang. In any case, the word *is* derogatory; these philosophers (of relatively rigid schools) categorize Paul as another of the all-too-numerous talkers whom they have seen in the *agora*.

They believe Paul to be "a preacher of foreign divinities," and according to Luke this was because Paul was preaching "Jesus and the resurrection."[81] The parallel with Socrates is again noted in this verse; Barrett says that "the hints and the figure of Socrates . . . become more definite in what is nearly an explicit quotation [of

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[78]Barrett, 2:830.
[79]Witherington, 514-15.
[80]Blaiklock, 179-80. Blaiklock further points out the use of this word in Aristophanes' *The Birds*.
[81]Commentators are divided as to whether τὴν ἀνάστασιν would have been taken to be a female deity; it seems best that Luke is simply describing the resurrection as a natural corollary to Paul's teaching on Jesus. The single element "Jesus and the resurrection" formed the content of Paul's teaching. See Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary, 3rd. ed.*, 377, and Witherington 515 for possibility that this refers to a female deity; see Barrett 831 for more definite view that this does not refer to a female deity.

Xenophon]."[82] Marshall notes that δαιμονίων here "is used in its neutral, Greek sense."[83] Paul is being accused of preaching foreign deities, and those who heard Paul in the *agora* wished for a fuller explanation of his teaching.

Verse 19 – Witherington notes that ἐπιλαβομενοί in the opening of this verse should "have the much stronger force of 'to take by force' or 'to arrest' (cf. Acts 16:19; 18:17). Both the immediate narrative context with its allusion to Socrates and then the reference to the Areopagus, and the usage of the verb in immediately surrounding chapters where Paul is regularly being hauled before officials to answer to charges, suggest [this] rendering."[84] However, Johnson notes two other places in Acts where this verb is translated "taking along," and that "the tone of the proceedings makes us think rather of a discussion than a formal hearing or trial."[85] Barrett agrees that the contextual meaning of this word depends "on the view that is taken of the proceedings as a whole."[86] Along with v. 20, it seems that these proceedings are not confrontational. Barrett says of v. 20 that "the verse suggests nothing more than a desire for information and enlightenment . . . ."[87] This seems to be the correct view; along with v. 33, in which Paul "went out from their midst," apparently without any hindrance or trouble, it is most likely that the philosophers "taking hold of him . . . led him to the Areopagus" without force or formal arrest.[88]

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[82]Barrett, 2:830. See also Marshall, 284. Socrates sums up the charge made against him as Θεοὺς οὓς ἡ πόλις νομίζει οὐ νομίζοντα, ἕτερα δὲ δαιμόνια καινά (Plato, *Apology* 24B-C).
[83]Marshall, 284.
[84]Witherington, 515.
[85]Johnson, 314.
[86]Barrett, 2:831.
[87]Ibid, 833.
[88]The polite tone of the questioning in v. 19b also leads to this conclusion; Luke usually makes it clear when Paul faces hostility (as in Acts 16:19-24; 17:5-8; 19:28-41).

The Areopagus[89] itself could refer either to the geographical location (the Hill of Ares or Mars at Athens) or to the council which met there. It is likely that Luke here indicates the council. Barrett notes that Dionysius' designation Ἀρεοπαγίτης in v. 34 points to this meaning: "The term [Ἀρεοπαγίτης] confirms that, in Luke's view, the Areopagus was a body of men, not a place."[90] Stonehouse,[91] Bruce,[92] and Witherington[93] come to the same conclusion. Witherington gives the same reason as Barrett, and adds that Paul standing ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ Ἀρείου πάγου (v. 22) further indicates that Luke refers to the council, not the hill.

Barrett gives a helpful description of the Areopagus in the first century.[94] Bruce notes that "this was the most venerable Athenian court, dating back to legendary times. Its traditional power was curtailed as Athens became more democratic, but it retained jurisdiction in cases of homicide and in religious and moral questions generally, and commanded great respect because of its antiquity. Under the Romans its prestige and authority were increased."[95]

In sum, v. 19 indicates that a group of philosophers (including Stoics and Epicureans) heard Paul preaching in the *agora* (the Athenian marketplace), especially noting that he was "a preacher of foreign divinities." These philosophers asked him to more fully develop his teaching in front of the Areopagus council, in an informal way (that is, Paul was not forced to accompany them, nor was there an official trial).

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[89]Barrett notes that "῎Αρειον πάγον is correctly written, *divisim*" (p. 832), but the standard Anglicized form is as above, "Areopagus."
[90]Barrett, 2:855.
[91]Stonehouse, 13.
[92]Bruce, *The Book of the Acts,* rev. ed., 331-32.
[93]Witherington, 515.
[94]Barrett, 2:831-32.
[95]Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary, 3rd. ed.*, 378.

Verse 20 – Continues the reasoning behind the philosophers' desire to hear Paul more fully. In v. 19 Paul's teaching is described as καινὴ ("new"). Luke now adds the substantive participle ξενίζοντα, "strange things." The philosophers ask Paul to more fully expound his teaching, and the tone of the request is polite: "the verse suggests nothing more than a desire for information and enlightenment."[96] Johnson likewise says that "in the present case the attitude of the council (or of gathered philosophers) is one open to instruction."[97] Moreover, the narrative positioning of this request leads directly to the narrator's intrusion in the following verse.

Verse 21 – In v. 19 Paul's teaching is described by the Athenian philosophers as "new," in v. 20 the things of which Paul speaks are "strange things," and now, in v. 21, Luke explains why the Athenians are so interested in such things. Witherington says that this is "one of [Luke's] rare overt remarks,"[98] and it is a decidedly negative commentary on the character of the Athenians.[99] A host of ancient citations is given in the commentaries to show that this characterization had been noted often apart from Luke.[100]

Synopsis vv. 16-21

A synopsis of vv. 16-21 might be as follows: Paul, in Macedonia as a result of a vision, having suffered beatings (in Philippi, Acts 16:22-23), imprisonment (also in Philippi, 16:23-24), and the threat of mob violence (in Thessalonica and Berea, 17:5, 12),

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[96]Barrett, 2:833.
[97]Johnson, 314.
[98]Witherington, 517.
[99]See Titus 1:12-13 for another NT instance of a straightforward, negative characterization of an entire people group. NT authors were apparently much more comfortable with this than modern authors.
[100]See especially Barrett, 2:833-34; Johnson, 314, and Bruce, *The Book of the Acts,* rev. ed. 332.

has been hurried off by his friends to the city of Athens, to remove him, at least briefly, from the agitation caused by his preaching in these Macedonian cities.

As Paul waited in Athens for his friends (v. 16), it seems that he initially took a respite from his work of preaching and teaching. However, Paul was provoked by the prevalent idolatry in Athens. This idolatry represented hostility towards the true God, and marked a real need for the gospel in Athens. The idolatry of Athens provoked Paul to preach, again according to his usual pattern: first in the synagogue, and then also to the Gentiles wherever they might be found. Famously, in Athens, they were to be found in the *agora*. Paul's discussion and preaching there attracted the notice of the Epicureans and Stoics. They invited him to present his teaching more extensively to the Areopagus council, who, among other things, exercised some authority over teaching in Athens. The narrative is briefly interrupted by the narrator to note the Athenian penchant for intellectual fad, a decidedly negative characteristic in the narrator's view. Finally, the apostle Paul, "standing in the midst of the Areopagus" council, begins his address.

Verse 22 – Paul opens his speech to the Areopagus by noting that the Athenians are κατὰ πάντα ὡς δεισιδαιμονεστέρους, "very religious in everything." Considerable debate surrounds the word δεισιδαιμονεστέρους, especially as that word in reference to the Athenians seems to set Paul's tone for the speech, expressing his attitude towards his audience and their practices. Many commentators note that the word in its root form can mean either "superstitious" or "religious."[101] Most also note the ambiguity of the word and its dependence on context for fuller meaning. Stonehouse perhaps sums it up best:

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[101]See, e.g., Stonehouse, 22, Bruce, *The Book of the Acts,* rev. ed., 335, Barrett 1:334-36, Johnson, 314, Witherington, 520, Marshall, 285, Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary, 3rd. ed.*, 380 along with bibliography; see also the articles by Patrick Gray, "Athenian

> The question whether Paul means that they were uncommonly religious or uncommonly superstitious (allowing for some ambiguity in the term and accordingly for differences of interpretation) will have to be determined, insofar as that is possible, by the evaluation of the context.[102]

The word in this context, at the beginning of Paul's address, seems to set up a topic of discussion or a framework for the rest of the speech, and the fuller content of that "religiousness" will be shown throughout the remainder of his address. Paul is staking out bounds for discussion rather than attempting to narrowly define the Athenians.[103] For these reasons, "religious" is exactly the right English translation for this word, as it has the same positive or negative connotations, depending on the context. Barrett discusses "the comparative form of the adjective and the use of ὡς"[104] and translates this as "makes a great display of piety."[105] In light of v. 16 the translation "very religious" is best here,[106] the Athenians were particularly interested in religious matters.

Verse 23 – Paul describes the evidence for his determination that the Athenians were δεισιδαιμονεστέρους. Wanting to ensure that all the gods were appeased, the Athenians

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Curiosity," *Novum Testamentum* 47:2 (2005) and Colin Hemer, "The Speeches of Acts: The Areopagus Address," *Tyndale Bulletin* 40:2 (1989), 245. Note also the difference in the KJV and modern translations.

[102]Stonehouse, 22-23.

[103]This seems a better explanation than that which describes the use of this word in Luke's record of Paul's speech as ironic or as a deliberate playing to two audiences. The word should not be allowed to weigh too heavily in an attempt to determine Paul's attitude towards his audience. Mark Given's article "Not Either Or but Both And in Paul's Areopagus Speech" focuses on the importance of the "implied reader . . . a position that distinguishes between the oratees of the speech – a group of philosophically inclined pagans who are uninformed outsiders in relation to Christianity – and the narratee – Theophilus – who is an informed insider on the basis of his reading of Luke/Acts to this point in the narrative" (p. 357). Based on this position, Given argues that "the reader already knows that the author of Acts is fascinated by the polysemic nature of words and the way a word or expression can mean one thing to the speaker and quite another to the audience . . . . Therefore, since the reader has been given fair warning that the author enjoys play on words, when faced with the highly ambiguous phrase δεισιδαίμων, he or she is not strongly tempted to think only one meaning is meant" (p. 370). This seems overly subtle, and puts too much emphasis on the individual lexical unit instead of the overall speech. It seems that the ideal reader (whether the reader of Luke's narrative or the audience of the Areopagus) should be thinking at this point in the speech, "Hmm . . . I am not sure yet what he means; I will wait to hear the entirety of the speech."

[104]Barrett, 2:836.

[105]Ibid., 822.

[106]See Stonehouse's comment (p. 11) regarding the "excessive zeal of Athens."

even dedicated an idol ᾽Αγνώστῳ Θεῷ, "to an unknown god."[107] Verse 23b opens Paul's main argument - this is the hinge of the speech where Paul turns to his real point. The theme of ignorance throughout the book of Acts has been stressed by many authors.[108] Barrett aptly sums up the relationship of the τοῦτο clause to the preceding ὃ οὖν clause: "ὃ should be taken rather as the object of ἀγνοοῦωτες than of εὐσεβεῖτε: What in the practice of your religion you do not know (namely, the true God; see I Thess. 4.5; Gal. 4.8), that I proclaim."[109] The paraphrase might be "the God you do not know, I proclaim." Paul therefore tells the Athenians that of which they are ignorant, not that which they worship.

Verses 24-25 – Most modern commentators note the importance and variety of OT references in Paul's speech, beginning especially in these verses. Several important ideas surface in these verses: God as the creator, the reality that God does not "dwell in temples," and God as the giver and sustainer of life. Barrett lists several OT references that speak of God as the creator, including Gen. 1:1, Ex. 20:11, and Is. 42:5.[110] For the truth that God does not "dwell in temples," Bruce notes I Kings 8:27 and Is. 66:1-2.[111] Witherington also points out the close affinity of vv. 24-25 to Is. 42:5 in the LXX.[112] These references suggest that Paul drew concepts and language from the OT for this part of his speech. However, Barrett also points out that "the concept of God as the maker of

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[107]Many commentators note the historical and archaeological references for this inscription. Surviving inscriptions are to "unknown *gods*" (plural); Jerome posits that Paul saw the plural inscription and changed it in his speech to singular. While there is no archaeological or independent historical evidence for this precise inscription (in the singular), there is abundant evidence for inscriptions so similar to this one to substantiate this narrative. See Bruce, *The Book of the Acts,* rev. ed., 335-36, Barrett, 2:837-38, and especially Witherington, 521-23.

[108]See, for instance, Stonehouse 24-27 for the theme of ignorance in the Areopagus speech.

[109]Barrett, 2:839.

[110]Ibid. Barrett also lists apocryphal and patristic sources for this idea.

[111]Bruce, *The Book of the Acts,* rev. ed., 336.

[112]Witherington, 525.

the universe was Greek as well as Jewish,"[113] and he cites Plato's *Timaeus* and the writings of Epictetus as examples. Witherington reflects that Plato's *Euthyphro* also "discussed whether service to the gods was possible or not."[114] Conceptually, then, these two verses allow for at least two different interpretations, which Witherington summarizes along with their major proponents:

1) "Dibelius and others who have followed him have argued that there is nothing particularly Christian about the speech . . ., that essentially it reflects Graeco-Roman thought with something of a monotheistic slant."[115]
2) "Nauck, Gärtner, and others have argued that the speech reflects the sort of thinking that one finds in Hellenistic Jewish apologetics, with the addition of the idea of God appointing the man Jesus, raised from the dead, as judge at the final judgment."[116]

Witherington himself believes that "on the whole, the latter view seems much nearer the truth."[117] In fact, this view is further strengthened when the similarities of diction between these verses and the LXX are taken into consideration. Bruce notes the similarity in the speech's conceptual matter to that of Greek thought, but concludes that "Paul's presuppositions are not drawn from Platonism or Stoicism but unambiguously from the OT"[118] and notes the similarity to Acts 4:24. In that verse the believing community, reunited with Peter and John, open their prayer with δέσποτα, σὺ ὁ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς, which is very close to Ex. 20:11, which says that in six days ἐποίησεν κύριος τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς. Also, Psalm 145:5-6 has almost the same phrase: κύριον τὸν θεὸν αὐτοῦ/ τὸν ποιήσαντα τὸν

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[113]Barrett, 2:840.
[114]Witherington, 525.
[115]Witherington, 524.
[116]Ibid, 524.
[117]Ibid, 524.
[118]Bruce *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary, 3rd. ed.*, 382.

οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν,/ τὴν Θαλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς. Therefore, Bruce concludes that, in the case of Acts 4:24, "the disciples here follow a well-established liturgical form."[119] Marshall accounts for the sole substantial linguistic difference in Acts 17:24a, the use of κόσμον instead of τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν:

> The Old Testament does not employ the word world (Gr. *kosmos*), since there is no corresponding term in Hebrew; rather it speaks of 'the heaven and the earth' or 'the all' (Je. 10:16). But the word was used in Greek speaking Judaism (Wisdom 9:9; 11:17; 2 Macc. 7:23), and it is not surprising to find it here (cf. Rom. 1:20); Paul employs the language that we would expect a Greek-speaking Jew to use, especially when addressing pagans.[120]

The conclusion is that Paul drew from the OT both conceptually and linguistically in these verses, but carefully chose words that his Athenian audience would also understand.

Verse 26-27 – Barrett notes that "it must be emphasized that the whole sentence, composing vv. 26,27, is a unit of which the various parts belong together . . . ."[121] Most modern translations have "out of one man" (ESV) or "from one man" (NIV, NASB) for ἐξ ἑνὸς (also Marshall, 287; Bruce *GT* pp. 382-83; Barrett pp. 841-42; Johnson, 315). Several commentators note the contrast between the Athenian legend of their own ancestry with Paul's assertion that humanity has one common ancestor.[122] Barrett confirms that this verse "referred to the creation of one man, Adam, the father of all; there was no clear parallel to this in Greek thought and mythology."[123] Barrett further

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[119]Ibid., 156.
[120]Marshall, 286.
[121]Barrett, 2:841-42.

[122]Bruce (*The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary, 3rd. ed.*) contrasts the Athenian legend of their own ancestry with Paul's assertion on pp. 382-83.
[123]Barrett, 2:842.

identifies a reference to the LXX in ἐπὶ προσώπου, saying "it is significant that Luke should (in this Areopagus speech) use the language of the Bible."[124]

Several different explanations have been given for the meaning of καιροὺς καὶ τὰς ὁροθεσία.[125] Reference is frequently made to Acts 14:17, where καιροὺς is normally translated "seasons" as in "seasons of the year,"[126] however, while there is no definite consensus, most commentators lean towards something akin to "historical periods" for this word, with ὁροθεσία referring to "national boundaries."[127] Marshall[128] and Barrett[129] point out the important affinity to Deut. 32:8. Witherington says that the importance of this reference has to do with the analogous contexts, noting that Deut. 32:8 "has an immediate relevance to the argument in our speech. The speech is monotheistic and opposes polytheism."[130] Based on the overall context of the argument in which Paul is describing God's *creation of* and *sovereignty over* all mankind, "the times which have been prescribed and the fixed boundaries of their dwelling place" should probably be seen as historical periods and national boundaries.

ζητεῖν to open v. 27 is an infinitive of purpose, and it refers back to ἐποίησέν in v. 26: "he made . . . that they would seek." The following clause (εἰ ἄρα γε ψηλαφήσειαν αὐτὸν καὶ εὕροιεν) is a rarity in the NT; Wallace notes this as an example of a fourth class condition ("less probable future") using εἰ + optative in the protasis.[131]

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[124]Ibid.
[125]See Barrett, 2:843 for several options.
[126]Evident in ESV, NIV, NASB, and KJV.
[127]Marshall, 288.
[128]Ibid.
[129]Barrett,2: 843.
[130]Witherington, 527. Note, however, that Witherington uses a translation of an alternate text from Qumran, and explains that "the LXX and the Greek targums seem to be compatible with this reading" (p. 527). The LXX has κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἀγγέλων θεοῦ; the MT has למספר בני ישׂראל.
[131]Wallace, 700.

The implication of this usage is "uncertainty about the end result of the 'seeking.'"[132] Barrett[133] and Blaiklock[134] point out the important classical reference of ψηλαφῶν; Blaiklock mentions that the word is used in four instances in the LXX but that "the word [Paul] uses would raise echoes in every listening Greek."[135] Paul completes this sentence with καὶ γε οὐ μακρὰν ἀπὸ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου ἡμῶν ὑπάρχοντα. Whether designed with this purpose or not, this clause represents a direct refutation of Epicurean doctrine. More importantly, however, Stonehouse notes that "the concessive character of this statement indeed confirms the conclusion that the goal of finding God had not been attained, but it also reflects positively on an actual relationship of God to all men in the present situation."[136] In sum, these two verses show Paul describing God's creation of all mankind out of one man, his determinate labor in the design of nations, and, finally, God's purpose for man himself. Importantly, however, this purpose is not guaranteed of fulfillment.

Verse 28 – The opening clause of this verse is sometimes translated as a quote (see ESV, NIV), but the NA[27] does not offset this phrase (as it does the more clear reference at the end of the verse) to indicate a quote (see NASB, who translate the final clause of the verse as a quote, but not the opening clause). Johnson notes that "It is possible that Luke is alluding to a poem attributed to the Cretan poet Epimenides" but that "it is not certain that Luke intended this to be a direct quotation, and the precise form of the line in

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[132]Witherington, 528.
[133]Barrett, 2:845.
[134]Blaicklock, 188.
[135]Ibid., 187.
[136]Stonehouse, 34.

Epimenides (if such it was) is not known."[137] The final clause is certainly a quote; Barrett says that "the quotation is definitely from Aratus."[138]

Stonehouse outlines the difficulty in this verse: "there emerges most acutely the problem of the propriety of appealing to pagan teaching with the apparent intent of confirming Christian doctrine. The problem is formidable because the quotations in their proper pagan contexts express points of view which were undoubtedly quite repugnant to Paul."[139] The context of this part of the speech makes clear that "we are God's offspring or kin; God created us, not the other way around. Whatever the notion of kinship meant in the original quote, the idea has been taken up and transfigured into a support for the idea that human beings are created by God and in God's image; God is not created in ours."[140] Witherington goes on to say that Paul uses a pagan quote rather than a direct OT reference for rhetorical reasons: "From a rhetorical point of view the function of the quotation or quotations here is to cite an authority recognized by one's audience to support one's point. It would have done Paul no good to simply quote the Scriptures, a book the audience did not know and one that had no authority in the minds of these hearers. Arguments are only persuasive if they work within the plausibility structure existing in the minds of the hearers."[141] Witherington also points out that this quote is a springboard from which to criticize idolatry in the following verse.[142] Marshall says that "Paul was prepared to take over the glimmerings of truth in pagan philosophy about the nature of God."[143] Most importantly, the conclusions described in this verse, including

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[137]Johnson, 316.
[138]Barrett, 2:848.
[139]Stonehouse, 34.
[140]Witherington, 530.
[141]Ibid.
[142]Ibid.
[143]Marshall, 289.

the quotation from Aratus, are in Paul's usage based on the premises in v. 26. *Paul thereby closely links them to the worldview of the OT.* The quotation should not be treated as an isolated element, but must be understood in the OT framework which Paul provides in his speech.[144]

Verse 29 – The first clause of this verse show Paul's agreement, at least in some sense, with the pagan verse he has just quoted. In fact, he uses this proposition as a basis upon which to build an argument: if it is true that we ('we' in this context clearly means all humanity, as in "each one of us" in v. 27) are in some sense the offspring of God, then we ought not to think in the way which is exemplified in the Athenian *agora.* For Paul, the concept of "offspring of God" is clearly related to the idea of God's creation of man given in v. 26. Because Paul has already established the fact that God created man, he can now speak of man as God's "offspring." Barrett takes the argument thus: "If human nature is what we know it to be, and if we who have human nature are God's children, the divine nature will be of no lower order. We deny our own proper being if we identify our progenitor with material objects."[145] Soards likewise notes that this verse "exposes the faulty logic that has led to constructing elaborate religious edifices"[146] and relates this confrontation of idolatry with that of Acts 19:26. In fact, this confrontation is part of a larger theme: now that the gospel is in its third stage of expansion ("to the ends of the earth" in Acts 1:8), Luke contrasts the gospel to pagan religion (i.e., idolatry). Luke shows this beginning in the narrative of Paul and Barnabas at Lystra (Acts 14), the directions sent by church leaders to converted pagans (Acts 15:20), here in Paul's speech

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[144]See above for Paul's use of OT language and themes in v. 26.
[145]Barrett, 2:849.
[146]Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 99.

to the Areopagus, and at Ephesus in Acts 19. Paul, having made the connection to his audience based on their own authorities in v. 28, here proposes a syllogism to attack the idolatry in the city.

Verse 30 – ESV does not translate μὲν οὖν, but it seems necessary to mark that Paul is making a contrast in this verse between the past and the present. In the past, the "times of ignorance," God "overlooked" this type of idolatry, but now, with the message that Paul is proclaiming, that time of ignorance is over. Therefore the proper response is repentance, which Paul claims is the will of God for all men. Barrett says regarding "overlooked": "God did not will or approve this ignorant idolatrous worship, but he did not suppress it; he overlooked it, ὑπεριδὼν."[147] Further, "it was not God's intention that men should continue permanently in this ignorance of his true being and worship in ignorant idolatry."[148] τὰ νῦν, that is, "now," following Paul's message, the time of ignorance is over and the time for repentance has come. "Now" also God commands τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πάντας πανταχοῦ, "all men everywhere" (that is, not only Jews but Gentiles) to repent. If Paul's speech began with some broad observations or points of contact with his listeners, it has just become more focused.

Verse 31 – Paul's speech becomes even more pointed in v. 31. The reason God calls all men to repent, according to Paul, is that he has set a day, ἔστησεν ἡμέραν, "in which he intends to judge the world in righteousness." Bruce notes several OT and Pauline references closely identified with κρίνειν τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ.[149] A comparison of the language used here by Paul and that of Psalm 9:9 and 95:13 of the

[147]Barrett, 2:851.
[148]Ibid.
[149]Bruce, *The Book of the Acts,* rev. ed., 340.

LXX shows that Paul is again drawing from the OT. Psalm 9:9 has καὶ αὐτὸς κρινεῖ τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ; Psalm 95:13 has ὅτι ἔρχεται κρῖναι τὴν γῆν·/ κρινεῖ τῆν οἰκουμένην ἐν δικαιοσύνη. Moreover, God has already appointed a man to execute this judgment. The broader themes with which Paul began his speech are now linked specifically to "a day" and "a man," a particular time and person.[150] The identification of the man whom Paul is speaking is clear to the reader; Luke has given the clue in v. 18 when he says that Paul τὸν ᾽Ιησουν καὶ τὴν ἀνάστασιν εὐηγγελίζετο. Barrett notes the distinction in Paul's audience and Luke's: "The next clause effects the identification – for the reader. Luke has not forgotten that Jesus is the man who is also Lord and Christ."[151] This man's claim to be judge is not merely based on proclamation; God has shown "proof to all by raising him from the dead." That πίστιν should be read here with the unusual meaning "proof" is shown by Barrett, who cites similar uses in Aristotle and Plato, and a similar collocation in Josephus.[152] Bruce notes another similar collocation in Vettius Valens.[153] "Raising him from the dead" clearly has its parallel in the narrative in v. 18. Luke shows that the content of Paul's message has not changed from that of the synagogue and the *agora.* Paul is clearly speaking in this verse about Jesus.

Verse 32 – Paul concludes his speech in v. 31. Luke describes two distinct responses in v. 32, personified in the two groups, one of which "mocked" while the other responded ambiguously. Luke makes clear that it was the bit about the resurrection from the dead that provoked these two responses: ἀκούσαντες δέ ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν. Barrett notes

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[150]See text critical notes for alternate reading in D which adds the name Ιησου.
[151]Barrett, 2:853.
[152]Ibid.
[153]Bruce *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary, 3rd. ed.*, 386. See also Witherington, 531-32.

the importance of the οἱ μέν . . . οἱ δέ construction in determining the reaction of the two groups. This construction denotes a *contrast*; some clearly disbelieved Paul's message and "mocked," but some were unsure. The second group should therefore be seen as genuinely unsure, and not as merely delaying on pretense. Regarding the seemingly abrupt conclusion to the speech, Witherington says: "There is some question of whether we should see the end of this speech as interrupted. The answer in this case is probably not." Soards[154] also mentions the seemingly short ending to the speech, but concludes that this does not indicate an interruption of Paul's speech.

Verse 33 – Paul left the meeting of the Areopagus. Since he "went out from their midst" it is likely that Ἀρείου πάγου should be taken to mean the council, and not the hill.[155] Further, there is no mention of any forceful attempt to keep Paul there (especially in light of the frequent narrative reference to Paul's imprisonment and beatings, e.g. Acts 14:5, 19; 16:23-24; 18:12), therefore, the view that Paul spoke to the Areopagus under no compulsion seems best.

Verse 34 – Luke notes that, in contrast (δὲ) to those who mocked and those who were unsure, some clearly believed and were converted. Paul's speech, though having a mixed reaction, nevertheless bears real, positive, and immediate fruit. This mixed reaction is a typical, and not an abnormal, response to gospel proclamation, especially as related in Acts (cf. 4:1-4; 14:4; 17:4-5). Some have put forward the position that Paul's approach in Athens was viewed by himself as a failure, and that he therefore changed his methods as related in I Cor. 2:2. Bruce, however, represents the more generally accepted view: "The

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[154]Soards, 100.
[155]Cf. Barrett, 2:854.

idea, popular with many preachers, that his determination, when he arrived in Corinth, to 'know nothing' there 'except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (I Cor. 2:2), was the result of disillusionment with the line of approach he had attempted in Athens, has little to commend it."[156]

[156]Bruce, *The Book of the Acts,* rev. ed., 344.

Characterization of Speaker, Audience, and Time

Along with grammatical and syntactical considerations, a number of important contextual factors are likewise important for understanding the Areopagus speech. Especially important are Luke's characterization of *speaker*, *audience*, and *time*, as they are described in the Acts narrative. While these characterizations are by no means exhaustive of the contextual factors surrounding the speech, understanding of these characterizations, and especially the complex relationship which they create in this pericope, provides a *basic* context into which the speech can be fit exegetically. Luke intends for the reader to understand who Paul is, who the Athenians are, and what time it is in the narrative, and to read the individual elements of the Areopagus speech in light of these contextual elements. Luke's characterizations of speaker and audience are consistent with the picture of Paul and the Athenians given in other literature; a brief examination of some secondary texts will corroborate Luke's account.

Luke's Characterization of Paul

Paul increasingly dominates the storyline of Acts as the scene of the action moves away from Jerusalem. Paul is introduced as an enemy of the faith in Acts 7, but he is converted in Acts 9 "and immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying 'He is the Son of God.'"[157] The book of Acts centers on Paul after chapter 13, describing his travels, ministry, and legal defense. Only in a few instances is the focus turned away

[157]Acts 9:20.

from Paul in the second half of Acts (e.g., Acts 15). Luke thus provides ample opportunity for the reader to observe Paul's character; he is a major, complex character, and not a minor one. He is portrayed in many different geographical areas and interacting with many different types of people. He undergoes change (as in Acts 9), yet certain characteristics of his personality are continuous throughout the narrative. Paul is not a shy man, whether he is persecuting the church in Acts 8, attempting to address a hostile crowd in Ephesus in chapter 19, or at Jerusalem in chapters 21-22. When he defends himself in front of the imperial courts, he consistently is shown by his words and actions boldly proclaiming his message.

Luke's repetition of some elements in the broader Acts narrative also serve to characterize Paul. Repetition of his conversion experience (Acts 9, 22, and 26) highlights this experience as a key to understanding Paul. Paul's mission is likewise the subject of frequent repetition; Luke describes it in Acts 9:15, 13:26, 19:11-17, 22:14-15, and 26:16-18. Luke uses these episodes to underline Paul's life goal. After Paul is converted, Jesus says of Paul that "he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."[158] Paul is a missionary of Jesus, divinely commissioned as an apostle to make Jesus known throughout the world, to both Israel *and* the Gentile nations. The authenticity of Paul's commission is highlighted in several ways. Luke describes Paul doing miracles (Acts 17:11; 20:7-12), and contrasts him to those who attempt to use Jesus' name mechanistically (Acts 17:13-16).

Paul's conversion to Christ does not mean that he has now jettisoned the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, Paul believes that he has been converted to the *proper reading* of Scripture. The life he pursued before he met the resurrected Jesus was based on a false

[158]Acts 9:15.

reading of the text. Now, Paul sees that Christ fulfills the promises made in the Hebrew Scriptures. Therefore, Luke consistently shows Paul explaining, arguing from, and preaching from the Scriptures, especially to the Jews. In Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13), Paul begins his exposition in the synagogue with the captivity in Egypt, and gives a brief summary of the biblical story to the time of David, then shows Jesus as the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. Further, Paul claims that Jesus was killed because the Jews in Jerusalem "did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath . . . ."[159] How had they misread the prophets? Paul explains by relating Jesus to four specific passages: Psalm 2:7 (which Paul himself enumerates by chapter), Isaiah 55:3,[160] Psalm 16:10, and finally Habakkuk 1:5. Paul cites Scripture in defense of the message of Christ *as against* those Jews who reject him, in Acts 13:47 (from Is. 49:6). In Thessalonica (Acts 17) Paul goes to the synagogue and "on three Sabbath days he reasoned with [the Jews] from the Scriptures,"[161] and again relates Jesus to the Hebrew Scriptures. In Berea (Acts 17) those who hear Paul's message are "examining the Scriptures daily"[162] in order to see if what Paul is telling them is in accordance with what was written. The Bereans find that Paul's message *is* in accord with Scripture, and many of them are converted.[163] Paul's adherence to Scripture is such that he quotes it in approval even against convenience. For example, in Acts 23:5 he cites Ex. 22:28 in condemnation of his own action of speaking against the high priest. Speaking in his own defense before the Roman official Felix (Acts 24), Paul says that

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[159]Acts 13:27.

[160]Although comparison of Acts 13:34 and Isaiah 55:3 in the English versions (see, e.g., ESV and NIV) indicates that there is merely thematic similarity here, comparison of the Greek text of Acts with the LXX reveals almost identical phrasing.

[161]Acts 17:2.

[162]Acts 17:11. In another comment by the narrator, the Bereans are commended in this verse for making sure that Paul's message is in line with Scripture.

[163]Acts 17:12.

"according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets . . . ."[164] Again, before Agrippa (Acts 26) Paul says that in his preaching of Jesus, he speaks of "nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass . . . ."[165] Finally, at Rome Paul speaks to the local Jewish leadership. Luke says that Paul was "trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets."[166] Paul then quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10 to show that his gospel fulfills the Scriptures, and that those who reject Christ, even though they be ethnic Jews, have also rejected the Scriptures.

This catalogue of citations shows that Luke consistently characterizes Paul as thoroughly committed to the Hebrew Scriptures, both for his own practice and for his teaching. Paul believes that his conversion resulted in a renewed, *proper* reading of the Scriptures, as opposed to the incorrect reading being followed by those Jews who reject Christ.

How does this characterization of Paul throughout the wider Acts narrative inform the narrower world of the Athens pericope? Speaking to the Athenians is different from speaking to Jews. Though Paul starts out in the synagogue in Athens, the focus of this passage is on non-Jewish Athenians, pagans steeped in idolatry. Therefore Paul does not explicitly cite any Scripture in his address to the Athenians. Nevertheless, Paul is a faithful Jew who derives his message from the Scripture. A close examination of these elements shows not only a strong *thematic* connection between the OT worldview and Paul's speech to the Athenians, but also a very strong *linguistic* connection between the

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[164]Acts 24:14.
[165]Acts 26:22.
[166]Acts 28:23.

speech and the LXX. The connection is so strong that it can be concluded that Paul's thinking *and his words* were drawn from the Hebrew text as it is found in the LXX. [167]

For example, Paul says in Acts 17:24 that ὁ θεὸς ὁ ποιήσας τὸν κόσμον καὶ πάντα τά ἐν αὐτῷ. This syntax finds very close parallels in the LXX, in Gen. 1:1 (ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν), and in Ex. 20:11 (ἐποίησεν κύριος τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς). Isaiah 42:5 also contains similar language with regard to the theme of creation, but in even more detail, and shows a remarkable similarity to vv. 24-25 of Acts 17:

Isaiah 42:5	Acts 17:24-25
οὕτως λέγει **κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ ποιήσας** τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ πήξας αὐτόν, ὁ στερεώσας τὴν γῆν καὶ **τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ** καὶ **διδοὺς πνοὴν** τῷ λαῷ τῷ ἐπ' αὐτῆς καὶ πνεῦμα τοῖς πατοῦσιν αὐτήν	ὁ **θεὸς ὁ ποιήσας** τὸν κόσμον καὶ πάντα **τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ**, οὗτος οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὑπάρχων **κύριος** οὐκ ἐν χειροποιήτοις ναοῖς κατοικεῖ οὐδὲ ὑπὸ χειρῶν ἀνθρωπίνων θεραπεύεται προσδεόμενός τινος, αὐτὸς **διδοὺς** πᾶσι ζωὴν καὶ **πνοὴν** καὶ τὰ πάντα

God is not only the creator of the heavens and the earth, he is also the one who gives breath to humans.[168] Isaiah 66:1-2a is also significant; in this passage are found exactly the same themes that Paul expresses in v. 24, with similarity in language:

> Οὕτως λέγει κύριος Ὁ οὐρανός μοι θρόνος, ἡ δὲ γῆ ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν μου· ποῖον οἶκον οἰκοδομήσετέ μοι; ἢ ποῖος τόπος τῆς καταπαύσεώς μου; πάντα γὰρ ταῦτα ἐποίησεν ἡ χείρ μου, καὶ ἔστιν ἐμὰ πάντα ταῦτα, λέγει κύριος . . .

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[167]Despite descriptions such as that of M. Dibelius in his 1951 book *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, where he says "what we have before us is a *hellenistic* speech about the true knowledge of God" (Dibelius, 57).

[168]With regard to the theme of creation, see also the preceding commentary for vv. 24-25, where Ps. 124:5-6 is also noted as having very similar language, and where comparison is made with Acts 4:24, about which Bruce says "the disciples here follow a well-established liturgical form" (Bruce *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary, 3rd. ed.*, 156). That is, this is a stock phrase from the Hebrew Scriptures used by the apostles in reference to the creator. See also the discussion in the commentary for vv. 24-25 of Marshall's explanation for Paul's use of κόσμον instead of τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ πήξας αὐτόν or its variant.

This passage describes God as the creator and originator of all things, and importantly, asks rhetorically about the house which is made for him. Speaking through Isaiah, God clearly implies that he does not "dwell in temples." This is exactly the theme that Paul expresses in Acts 17:24. Both Isaiah and Paul pair these themes together: God is the creator, who does not dwell in temples.

The idea that God does not "dwell in temples," as expressed by Paul, also finds thematic and linguistic parallel elsewhere in the LXX. From the very outset of Israel's experience with the Jerusalem temple (I Kings 8:27), Solomon makes clear that God does not "dwell in temples":

> ὅτι εἰ ἀληθῶς κατοικήσει ὁ θεὸς μετὰ ἀνθρώπων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; εἰ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς τοῦ οὐρανοῦ οὐκ ἀρκέσουσίν σοι, πλὴν καὶ ὁ οἶκος οὗτος, ὃν ᾠκοδόμησα τῷ ὀνόματί σου;

Solomon dedicates the Temple with the knowledge that for God to "dwell in a temple" is a (proper) anthropomorphism.

Paul also tells the Athenians that it is God who

> ἐποίησέν τε ἐξ ἑνὸς πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων κατοικεῖν ἐπὶ παντὸς προσώπου τῆς γῆς, ὁρίσας προστεταγμένους καιροὺς καὶ τὰς ὁροθεσίας τῆς κατοικίας αὐτῶν.

Several passages from the LXX bear close thematic and linguistic similarity. In Deuteronomy 32:8 Moses sings that

> ὅτε διεμέριζεν ὁ ὕψιστος ἔθνη,
> ὡς διέσπειρεν υἱοὺς Αδαμ,
> ἔστησεν ὅρια ἐθνῶν

As a response to the building of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, διέσπειρεν αὐτοὺς κύριος ἐκεῖθεν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον πάσης τῆς γῆς.[169] Both of these passages indicate that Paul drew his thoughts and words from the Old Testament in Acts 17:26.

Further, Paul's reaction to idolatry, here represented in vv. 16, 29-30, is clearly part of his Old Testament pedigree. Hatred of idolatry is central to Hebrew religion, beginning in Ex. 20:34. Israel is to worship the LORD only, and anything other is spiritual prostitution. Greek thinkers had indeed critiqued idolatry, but seemingly for the reason that they thought it superstitious or worthless. While Paul may have shared these ideas, there is a significant difference in Old Testament condemnation of idolatry. Man was created to be in a proper relationship with the true God, the one and only God, and man's attempt to substitute some other thing for God is a perversion. Therefore idolatry is more than harmless superstition, it is a serious breach of a covenant relationship which angers a jealous God. Luke describes Paul's reaction at seeing the gross idolatry of the city; v. 16 says that παρωξύνετο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ. The word παρωξύνετο is used in the LXX to describe God's reaction to the idolatry of his people in several instances. In Deut. 9:19, when Moses recalls the story of the golden calf at Sinai, he says to the Exodus community that the sin of creating the idol ὧν ἡμάρτετε ποιῆσαι τὸ πονηρὸν ἐναντίον κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ ὑμῶν παροξῦναι αὐτόν. The same language carries over into the following verse. Again in Deut. 32:19 Moses says that καὶ εἶδεν κύριος καὶ ἐζήλωσεν καὶ παρωξύνθη δι᾽ ὀργὴν υἱῶν αὐτοῦ καὶ θυγατέρων. This description follows several verses recounting the idolatry of Israel; in v. 16 they "stirred him [παρώξυνάν] to jealousy with strange gods" and in v. 17 "they sacrificed to demons

[169]Gen. 11:8, LXX.

that were no gods." In Hosea 8:5 the same relationship between this word and the idolatry of the people can be found. In the middle of a long section relating the punishment due to idolatry, God says that "I have spurned your calf, O Samaria. My anger burns against them [παρωξύνθη ὁ θυμός μου ἐπ' αὐτούς]." Luke's portrayal of Paul's reaction to idolatry is thus linguistically related to God's reaction as it is found throughout the OT.

Finally, Luke portrays Paul in Acts as consistent with regard to content, but flexible with regard to method in his exhibition of the gospel. Luke's description of Paul's consistency is found throughout Acts, beginning in Acts 9:20. Only two verses after being baptized (9:18), Luke relates that "immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'"[170] Luke specifically portrays Paul as preaching Jesus or the gospel, or otherwise relating his life and ministry to Jesus in every chapter between 13 and 28, except for 27.[171] Luke also relates Paul's methodological flexibility in a number of instances. In Acts 15:1-2, Luke shows Paul disputing with a group of Christians who were attempting to force the practice of circumcision on believers, even going so far as to say that without circumcision in the tradition of Moses, "you cannot be saved."[172] Paul, along with others in the church, disputes this, and the Jerusalem elders finally decide that circumcision is not necessary for salvation (Acts 15:28-29). Luke shows Paul in this situation resisting the practice of circumcision when it is made a part of salvation. However, in the following chapter (Acts 16), Luke represents Paul circumcising Timothy "because of the Jews who were in those places, for

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[170]Acts 9:20.
[171]In chapter 27, the sea narrative, Paul speaks of God, but not specifically of Jesus or the gospel.
[172]Acts 15:1.

they all knew that his father was a Greek."[173] Paul's apparent change from Acts 15 is due to a change in situation. In Acts 15, Paul refused to allow that circumcision was *necessary for salvation*, but in Acts 16 he circumcises Timothy in order to remove any impediment to his preaching of the gospel. Paul's circumcision of Timothy did not at all imply that Paul believed the practice necessary for salvation, but it greatly assisted his ministry, allowing Timothy to work freely among the Jews without unnecessary hindrance from those who still placed great importance on circumcision. Paul was thus *flexible* in his approach to ministering in the name of the gospel, without sacrificing any of its principles.

Luke describes another instance of Paul's methodological flexibility in Acts 21. Upon his return to Jerusalem Paul met with the leaders of the church in that city. Those leaders expressed joy regarding Paul's success among the Gentiles. They then told him that many of the Jews who believed in Christ nonetheless continued to follow ceremonial requirements of the law. The church leaders therefore asked Paul to take part in a ceremonial cleansing. This was to make it evident to Jewish believers that Paul was not hostile to the ceremonial law, and that he was a faithful Jew. The Gentiles, on the other hand, were told that such ceremonies were not necessary for their inclusion in the church. Nothing was compromised, and many troubles were thereby avoided. Paul readily agreed to the suggestion and participated in the ceremony. Thereby, he showed cultural flexibility where the central message of the gospel is not compromised.

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[173]Acts 16:3.

Luke's Characterization of the Athenians

Luke's characterization of the audience also sets the context for the Areopagus speech. Luke characterizes this audience in a number of ways, both explicitly and implicitly, and sometimes in ways that are unique within the world of the Acts narrative. These anomalies in the narrative require particular attention. Luke describes the Athenians through their own words and actions, and the relationship between word and action further characterizes Paul's audience. The speech itself also gives some indication of the audience to whom it is addressed. Luke's characterization of this audience can be helpfully examined in the three sections of the pericope: the opening description of Athens and the Athenians (vv. 16-21), Paul's speech (vv. 22-31), and the final assessment (vv. 32-34).

Luke characterizes the Athenians in the opening section of the Areopagus pericope by way of narrative, the dialogue of the audience themselves, and even by direct commentary made by the narrator. The narrative opens (v. 16) by describing the city as κατείδωλον, "full of idols." This is made evident by the physical presence of altars and "objects of worship." But, the real meaning of this description is to characterize the practices of the inhabitants of the city, and not merely to describe its statuary. The extent of idolatry in Athens was unusual;[174] even though Paul was certainly familiar with idolatry in other cities, the practices of Athenians were in this respect outstandingly bad.

Paul is then introduced to some of the inhabitants of the city as he continues his ministry by speaking in the marketplace. Luke specifies some of Paul's listeners in the *agora* as members of the Stoic and Epicurean schools (v. 18) and briefly records some of

[174]See references to Stonehouse and Marshall in the commentary for v. 16.

their conversation amongst themselves as they listen to Paul. They are curious. Some question the actual content of the message, while others provide an initial assessment (v. 18). Some of the Athenians listening to Paul in the marketplace refer to him as a σπερμολὸγος; this word indicates that they believe Paul to some sort of sophist, cobbling together various bits of impressive-sounding doctrine in order to make a name for himself. Although they are curious, the Athenians are also familiar with amateur speechifying in the *agora* and are somewhat jaded about it. Others react with a plainer assessment; because Paul is "preaching Jesus and the resurrection" (as we are told by the narrator), they refer to Paul as a "preacher of foreign divinities." Though the cosmopolitan Athenians were aware of a number of foreign gods from the east, they were not yet aware of "Jesus and the resurrection." Luke makes clear that these things were unknown to the Athenians in v. 19, in which they ask Paul about this "new teaching" and these "strange things."

Luke's characterization of the Athenian ignorance of Paul's message and their initial response to it are an important aspect of this pericope that is easily overlooked. Luke's descriptions of Paul's audiences elsewhere in Acts, where these were composed primarily of Jews, reveals that the audiences knew clearly what Paul was talking about, and either hated or loved it (see, for example, Acts 13:16-50; 14:1-6; 17:1-9; 22:1-23). Other, non-Jewish, audiences also react negatively, as in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-40), where the assumed economic impact of Paul's rejection of idolatry disturb the city tradesmen. At Lystra (Acts 14:8-18) Paul's audience reacts primarily to the miraculous healing of a lame man. Paul's message at Lystra is given to an audience who have badly misinterpreted the miracle, attributing its source to gods within the known Greek

pantheon. The Athenian audience, however, unsure of what Paul is saying and somewhat skeptical, nevertheless ask him to further explain the doctrine that he is teaching.

The Athenians are interested in Paul's message because of its novelty. They request further explanation because Paul's message is new and strange. The narrator, however, explains that this interest in novelty was characteristic of the Athenians, and it is not presented as a praiseworthy characteristic. The direct commentary of the narrator found in v. 21 is not typical of the Acts narrative; Witherington describes this as "one of [Luke's] rare overt remarks."[175] The rarity of this kind of comment highlights its importance. Either Luke believes that his readers are unfamiliar with the Athenian character, or he wants to point out exactly why the Athenians were initially interested in Paul's preaching. In either case, Luke's comment makes the Athenian's intellectual faddishness perfectly clear to his readers.

Luke's characterization of the Athenians continues in the body of Paul's speech. Paul opens by referring to them as κατὰ πάντα ὡς δεισιδαιμονεστέρους, "very religious in everything."[176] As noted in the commentary, this could either be complimentary or insulting, but no clarification is given at this point in the speech. While the preceding narrative predisposes readers towards viewing the word δεισιδαιμονεστέρους with its negative connotation, Paul's speech does not actually criticize the Athenian character, but shows how their religion is misguided.

Luke reveals the mixed nature of this audience in the final section of the pericope, vv. 32-34. In a response similar to that afforded to Paul throughout much of Acts, some of the Athenians mock him, others are unsure and desire to find out more, and some are

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[175]Witherington, 517.
[176]Acts 17:22.

converted. The conversion of some underscores the fact that Paul's message was successful. Even a member of the Areopagus council itself is converted. Moreover, a woman was present to hear Paul speak; though likely not a member of the council herself, her presence shows that Paul was not merely addressing the formal council. There were also others along with these two that were converted. Paul's method at Athens is hereby vindicated. Those who were converted were in some way part of the culture characterized in vv. 16-21, yet Paul's message found purchase with them and they became Christians.

Luke's Characterization of Time

The third important contextual element, characterized in the broader Acts narrative and of importance to Acts 17, is the element of time. There are actually two important time elements described in the Acts narrative: *narrative time* and *redemptive time*. *Narrative time* involves the author's placement of this pericope in the scope and sequence of his larger narrative. *Redemptive time* involves the narrator's description of the characters in the redemptive era to which they belong.

Luke provides the overall narrative framework for the book of Acts in 1:8, where the apostles are told by Jesus that they, after receiving power from the Holy Spirit, "will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Luke thus outlines the geographic spread of the gospel, and the narrative of Acts itself follows this three part structure.[177] Paul's speech to the Athenians falls in the third part;

[177]While the narrative clearly goes back and forth in its focus, the general trend is exactly as outlined in 1:8. Approximately the first seven chapters describe the gospel in Jerusalem, (approximately) chapters 8 through 12 describe Judea and Samaria, and chapters 13 through 28 describe the spread of the gospel to the "end of the earth."

the city of Athens is completely outside the area of Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Consequently, the audience here, apart from the synagogue, has no grounding in Mosaic law or Jewish practice. The inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judea, even those outside the Jewish faith, might be said to be familiar with Jewish culture and religion. However, in Athens the synagogue would be a small island, distinct, and isolated from its surrounding culture. The Athenians' ignorance of Jewish Scripture may present a challenge to the gospel message, but it is not insurmountable. Luke makes clear that Paul's message did get through to some, and these individuals were converted to Christ (Acts 17:34). Luke's placement of this pericope in the third section Acts reminds the reader of the very different audience, worldview, and overall situation now faced by the apostles and their message.

Paul speaks in v. 30 of the χρόνους τῆς ἀγνοίας, the "times of ignorance." Paul explains in the preceding verse that because man is the offspring of God, he ought to realize that God is not like any of the material objects crafted into idols. Thus the "times of ignorance" in v. 30 refer specifically to the worship of idols. Paul's message is meant to bring this era to an end. Soards notes that the Acts speeches frequently make use of constructions such as καὶ νῦν, καὶ τὰ νῦν, and τὰ νῦν (along with several others) in order to "mark the moments in which the speakers recognize and address the situation faced by themselves and their audiences."[178] This element is used to create an important hinge in Paul's speech in Athens; he says in v. 30 that τοὺς μὲν οὖν χρόνους τῆς ἀγνοίας ὑπεριδὼν ὁ θεός, **τὰ νῦν** παραγγέλλει τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πάντας πανταχοῦ μετανεῖν. Soards points to this as an example which "creates a contrast

[178]Soards, 190.

between the past and the present moment of the speech,"[179] particularly as this speech "signals a call to repentance and forgiveness."[180] Barrett likewise points out this conjunction as describing a contrast: "we may note also the adversative force of τὰ νῦν"[181] – there is a contrast between the former and the present time. Soards concludes from the prevalence of these time markers in the Acts speeches that

> The speakers recognize the critical nature of the moments in which they and their audience stand, and with their very words the speakers effect a contrast between the past and present that exposes the real character of the human situation.[182]

Soards links this closely to the former time of ignorance, for both Jew and Gentile, which is "no longer tolerable."[183] "The time of ignorance is brought to an end by the work of God in Jesus Christ, especially as Christ's witnesses testify to God's salvific activity."[184] Thus, the speeches in Acts show a pattern of distinguishing the former "time of ignorance" from the new time of Christ announced by the apostles; this distinction is marked by common linguistic markers. These markers are found in the Areopagus speech, showing (again) the distinction in the former "time of ignorance" and the new time in light of Christ, as it is now announced by his apostles. Luke's characterization of time means that the focus of Paul's speech is on *repentance*. In light of the change in redemptive era, repentance is the main theme of the speech and the action to which Paul calls his listeners. The change in redemptive era requires a corresponding change in the actions, thinking, and overall spiritual orientation of all people. Repentance and

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[179]Ibid. This contrast is further strengthened by μὲν at the beginning of the verse.
[180]Ibid., 191.
[181]Barrett, 2:850.
[182]Soards, 191.
[183]Ibid., 192.
[184]Ibid.

knowledge of the gospel as it is announced by Paul are described in clear contrast to the old age of idolatry and ignorance.

F.F. Bruce also describes the change in redemptive era marked in v. 30. He says that

> There is a parallel here not only to the statement in the Lystran speech that in past generations God 'allowed all the nations to go their own ways' (14:16), but also to Paul's teaching in Rom. 3:25 about God's forbearance in passing over sins committed before the coming of Christ. It is implied in all these places that the coming of Christ marks a fresh start in God's dealings with the human race.[185]

Bruce further notes that "'But now' in the present context [v. 30] is parallel to 'but now' in Rom. 3:21."[186] Luke's characterization of this change in redemptive time is found not only throughout Acts, but in two of Paul's speeches to pagans. It is also consistent with themes that Paul emphasizes elsewhere. Finally, Bruce also concludes that the emphasis on a new redemptive era highlights repentance: "If ignorance of the divine nature was culpable before, it is inexcusable now. Let all people everywhere (the Athenian hearers included) repent . . . ."[187]

The time markers in the speech also serve to highlight "Christ's witnesses."[188] In the new redemptive era which they are announcing, God has worked in a new way, and the testimony of the apostles is the critical means by which others may know the gospel. It is the apostles who are authorized to correct ignorance with the message of Christ. This is part of another large theme found throughout Acts (see 3:17 and 13:26-27) which emphasizes the apostolic witness. As for Paul himself, his conversion is related by Luke three times (Acts 9, 22, and 26), and his special commission several other times (9:15;

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[185]Bruce, *The Book of the Acts,* rev. ed., 340.
[186]Ibid.
[187]Ibid.
[188]Soards, 192.

13:26; 19:11-17; 22:14-15; 26:16-18). Luke makes clear that Paul's calling and message are given to him directly from God; the source for Paul's authority and message is supernatural. Paul is an authoritative witness to Christ; his calling and message are extraordinary. Therefore in the new redemptive era as it is marked out by the narrator, the apostles, having a message authenticated by God, dispel the old age of ignorance and idolatry, calling men to abandon those old, futile, and immoral practices, and to turn to the real and living God.

Secondary Characterization - Paul

The Pauline letters provide other important clues into the character of Paul which are of importance in understanding the Areopagus speech. In fact, they might be said to confirm and strengthen the representation of Paul as it is found in the Acts narrative. Though it is not possible to fully examine here the entire scope of Paul's character as it is described and revealed in his letters, several elements of particular importance to the Athens pericope in Acts will be examined.

Luke's characterization of Paul as consistent with regard to the content of his preaching, yet flexible with regard to method in his exhibition of the gospel, can also be seen in the letters of Paul himself. In the ninth chapter of I Corinthians Paul describes one of the critical principles which he applies in his ministry. In vv. 19-23 Paul says that

> For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means

> I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.[189]

Luke's Paul is the personification of this principle, seen in Acts 15, 16, and 21. Paul's description of himself is entirely consistent with Luke's description of his actions in the Acts narrative.

Paul insists on the sinfulness of man throughout his letters. He claims in Romans that "both Jews and Greeks . . . are under sin" (Rom. 3:9) – for Paul, the phrase "both Jews and Greeks" means "everyone" or "all people." In the flow of the argument in Romans Paul is contrasting, on the one hand Jews, and on the other hand, everyone else.[190] Therefore, Paul is contending that all of mankind, including each individual, is in a state of sin. This doctrine can also be found in Gal. 2:17, 3:22; Eph. 2:1-3; Col. 1:21, 2:13-14; I Tim. 1:15; and is implied in I Cor. 15:3 and Eph. 1:7. The doctrine of the sinfulness of man is not an isolated or minor theme in Paul's thought; it is found throughout the Pauline corpus. Nor is this doctrine absent from Luke's Paul. It is implied in Paul's call to repentance (Acts 13:38, 14:15, and 20:21) and in Paul's own conversion experience (Acts 23:16).[191] The Areopagus speech should therefore be read in light of Paul's consistent emphasis on the sinfulness of man.

The theme of idolatry also comes up frequently in Paul's writings. In I Cor. 10:14-22 Paul gives clear directions to an audience already converted to Christianity. His first instruction to them is "flee from idolatry" (v. 14). Despite the fact that he recognizes than an idol in itself is meaningless (vv. 19-20), Paul makes it clear that the Lord is the

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[189]I Cor. 9:19-23.

[190]Paul frequently uses the terms "Greek" and "Gentile" interchangeably in the opening chapters of Romans (see, for example, 1:16, 2:9, 2:14, 2:24, 3:9, and 3:29). The term "Greek" functions as synecdoche for all non-Jews in Paul's letter to the Romans.

[191]See also Acts 26:18,20.

unique object of worship in vv. 20-21. Idolatry is opposed to Christianity; Christ is opposed to idols.

Paul also speaks of idols in Romans. Here Paul claims that idolatry happened as a result of man's rejection of God (Rom. 1:21-23), and that God therefore allowed the moral deterioration which was the inevitable result of turning away from God (Rom. 1:24-25). It is man's conscious rejection of God that results in God's abandonment of man, and leads to man's moral deterioration. The significance of this description in Romans is profoundly related to the Areopagus speech – what Paul describes in Romans he sees exemplified in Athens.[192]

Secondary Characterization – The Athenians

The Athenians' curiosity about new teachings and penchant for leisure as it is described in Acts is well attested among its own speakers and writers. Demosthenes, attempting to goad the Athenians into resisting the aggressive policy of Phillip of Macedon, tells them that they are in their current danger because of their own βραδυτῆτα καὶ ῥᾳθυμίαν,[193] "slowness and laziness." He then asks

> πότ' οὖν, ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, πόθ' ἃ χρὴ πράξετε; . . . βούλεσθ', εἰπέ μοι, περιιόντες αὑτῶν πυνθάνεσθαι, 'λέγεταί τι καινόν;' γένοιτο γὰρ ἄν τι καινότερον ἢ Μακεδὼν ἀνὴρ Ἀθηναίους καταπολεμῶν[194]
>
> When, then, O Men of Athens, will you do that of which you have need? . . . Or tell me, do you wish to be going about inquiring of yourselves, 'What news is spoken?' For whatever could be newer than a man of Macedon completely wearing out the Athenians by war?

[192]Though not mentioned in Acts 17, not only was Athens κατειδωλον and the Athenians easily distracted by intellectual fad, they were also infamous pederasts (as noted by their greatest thinkers) – almost exactly the relationship outlined between idolatry and immorality described by Paul in Rom. 1:23-27.
[193]Demosthenes, First *Philippic,* 9 [4.9].
[194]Ibid., section 10 [4.10].

Luke's description of the Athenians always seeking new ideas bears a striking thematic and linguistic similarity to that of Demosthenes.

Thucydides also presents a speech in which the characterization of the Athenians is remarkably similar to that of Luke. In *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides relates a speech of Cleon to the Athenians, given with the purpose of dissuading them from changing their minds about a punishment for treachery that they had ordered against the citizens of Mytilene. Cleon strongly rebukes the Athenians for vacillating, and says that

> μετὰ καινότητος μὲν λόγου ἀπατᾶσθαι ἄριστοι, μετὰ δεδοκιμασμένου δὲ μὴ ξυνέπεσθαι ἐθέλειν, δοῦλοι ὄντες τῶν αἰεὶ ἀτόπων, ὑπερόπται δὲ τῶν εἰωθότων[195]
>
> You are the best men to be deceived according to the newest word, but you will not follow closely that which has been tested; you are always slaves to that which is strange, but disdainers of that which is customary.

This is precisely the characterization made of them in the Acts narrative. Thus, secondary characterization from a variety of sources corroborates the account given by Luke in Acts 17; the Athenians were particularly interested in that which was "new" or "strange," and not particularly consistent.

Thucydides' history also attests to the idolatry of the Greek world, which represented living worship for many people, in which the physical idol was of great importance. Thucydides' history attests also to this. On the eve of the Athenians' military expedition to Sicily in 415 B.C.,

> it was found that in one night nearly all the stone Hermae in the city of Athens had had their faces disfigured . . . . These are a national institution . . . of which there are great numbers both in the porches of private houses and in the temples . . . . The whole affair was taken very seriously, as it was regarded as an omen for the expedition . . . ."[196]

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[195]Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 3.38.5.

[196]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1972), 426. These Hermae were also the statues found throughout Athens (and especially the *agora*) in Paul's day.

On further investigation it was found that there had also occurred in the city various instances of "mock celebrations of the mysteries held in private houses."[197] The Athenians put to death those who were suspected of desecrating the Hermae, an indication of the degree of seriousness with which they viewed their idols and religious celebrations.[198] The Athenians further viewed these desecrations as an omen because they were enacted against Hermes, the god of travellers. Classicist Donald Kagan explains that "as Hermes was the god of travellers, the assault on his images was an obvious effort to prevent the planned expedition to Sicily . . . . The Athenians, like most Greeks, were also superstitious, and on many occasions stopped public meetings because of natural events like thunderstorms and earthquakes."[199]

Kagan further notes that the vandalized statues also had "their distinctive phalluses hacked off."[200] This nauseating aspect of Athenian idolatry and worship, not to be found in Bulfinch, indicates part of the horror of idolatry, as well as the real difference between modern conceptions of idolatry and its actual practice. Blaiklock says that a modern tourist, viewing the ruins of a statue of Athena

> regrets the destruction of a great statue. The reverence of the Athenian, . . . the repugnance of the Jew for blasphemy in bronze and stone, mean nothing to him.
>
> Perhaps the Christian can still touch the edge of that deep sensation only in the revolting presence of the phallic image. Some fragments, vast and intricately cared on Delos, reveal the gross mingling of carnality and religion which stirred the wrath of the Hebrew prophets, and which evoke a Christian disgust.[201]

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[197]Ibid.
[198]Thucydides, VI.60.4.
[199]Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 262-67.
[200]Ibid., 262.
[201]Blaiklock, 177.

Thus the modern reader, long accustomed to viewing the statuary of ancient Greece as beautiful sculpture, can begin to identify with the anger of Paul as he looked around in the city of Athens.[202] The idols were no mere products of artistic skill, meant to beautify the city or private homes, but were objects invested with real religious, socio-political, and emotional significance by the inhabitants of Athens.

Thus, the characterization of speaker and audience, as given in the Acts narrative, are corroborated and strengthened by secondary literature. These characterizations, along with Luke's characterization of time, describe a unique situation at Athens, a relationship between speaker and audience at a particular time. This relationship creates bounds for understanding the Areopagus speech; while not exhaustive of the context, these characterizations provide a *minimum* basis for properly understanding Paul's apologetic in Athens as it is related by Luke. The following chapters will examine two uses of the Areopagus speech which fail to properly consider this relationship.

[202]This is not to suggest that Paul's reaction was based on this feature of idolatry; Blaiklock's point is that the modern man is in no position to identify with Paul, having as he does a long tradition of viewing Greek statuary as art. Remembrance of the real nature of Greek idols, and the actual practices associated with them, ought to provoke a response similar to that of Paul.

Barr's Use of Acts 17 in *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*

Some have viewed Luke's representation of Paul's Areopagus speech as having its basis in natural theology. According to this view, Paul attempts to point the Athenians to the true God using knowledge of God commonly available to all men. While this view exists in a number of variants, one modern strain is represented by James Barr in his book *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*.[203] Based on his 1991 Gifford lecture,[204] this book outlines a case for the Bible as a witness to natural theology. Barr uses the Areopagus speech in Acts 17 as primary evidence for the existence of natural theology in the Bible, and draws a number of significant conclusions from it.[205] According to Barr, because Paul employed natural theology in his apologetic address to the Athenians, the Bible therefore condones the exercise of natural theology as a legitimate means of knowing God. Barr gives this definition of natural theology:

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[203]James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[204]The Gifford Lectures are an annual series of lectures dedicated to the topic of "natural revelation," in which the speakers are, according to Lord Gifford's instructions in his will, to "treat their subject as a strictly natural science . . . without reference to or reliance upon an supposed special exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation" (http://www.giffordlectures.org/will.asp). Interestingly, Gifford quotes in his will from Paul's Areopagus speech: "And my desire and hope is that these lectureships and lectures may promote and advance among all classes of the community the true knowledge of Him Who is, and there is none and nothing beside Him, in whom we live and move and have our being, and in whom all things exist, and of man's relationship to Him Whom truly to know is life everlasting" (Ibid.)

[205]The practical application of the result of Barr's argument can be found in the final chapter of the book, in which Barr discusses the Old Testament practice of חרם. Of this practice Barr says, "this institution is, of course, as everyone knows, one of the supreme cases in regard to which people feel a moral revulsion against the Old Testament and its God." A purely biblical theology, Barr explains, is hermeneutically inadequate to defend this practice. Barr says "on the face of it, the command of consecration to destruction is morally offensive and has to be faced as such." For Barr, "unless attention is given to the verdict of natural theology, it is likely that no attempt at any such improved understanding will be made." While Barr allows for development in the biblical revelation, he argues that the Bible should not have an authority apart from the check provided by the results of natural theology. Therefore, it is part of the apologetic task to reject those elements of the Bible shown to be reprehensible by natural theology.

> 'by nature,' that is, just be being human beings, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least a capacity for such an awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the church, through the Bible . . . . The 'natural' knowledge of God, however dim, is an awareness of the true God, and provides a point of contact without which the special revelation would never be able to penetrate to people . . . . [natural theology] does . . . imply that valid talk about God without any appeal whatever to special revelation is possible and indeed highly significant and important.[206]

Does Paul, in Luke's representation of him, appeal to such knowledge in the Areopagus speech? Does Luke's description of the Athenians reveal an audience having the capacity which Barr outlines? How does Luke's characterization of the change in redemptive era help to understand the elements of natural theology which Barr finds in this passage? Barr describes five "peculiar features"[207] of the Areopagus speech which he believes exhibit an apologetic appeal to natural theology:

1. "the complete absence of support adduced from the history, the law, and the experiences of Israel"
2. "the strong universalism, with God seen as determining alike the bounds and times for *all* human peoples"
3. "the clear prospect that any one of these [humans] might feel after him and find him"
4. "the conjunction of the high transcendence of the deity and his close presence and immanence," which includes "especially the idea that we live and move and have our being within him, the nearest approach to pantheism in the Bible," and that "all humans are his offspring"
5. "the idea that, though repentance is now demanded, faults of earlier times are to be overlooked"[208]

Each of these will be examined in light of Luke's characterization of speaker, audience, and time in the Acts narrative.[209]

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[206]Barr, 1.
[207]Ibid., 25.
[208]Ibid. (all the items quoted in this list are on p. 25).
[209]Of course, the context for Barr's study is the modern (post-19th century) discussion of natural theology, and in particular its relationship with biblical theology. Barr's argument is primarily directed against the theology of Karl Barth. In particular, he notes Barth's discussion with Emil Brunner in which Barth rejects the concept of natural theology entirely. Barr believes that "what [Barth] offers has not the slightest likeness to a serious exegesis of the text. On the contrary, it is a travesty of exegesis, indeed a denial of exegesis: for it makes no attempt to follow out the content of the passage [Acts17]. . ." (Barr,

As noted above,[210] Luke characterizes Paul as a man whose whole thought is centered in the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul's conversion includes a conversion from a false to a true reading of the OT text. Paul did not reject the OT, but saw it redefined in light of Jesus Christ. Luke's representation of Paul's words throughout the book of Acts shows that Paul drew from the LXX both thematically and linguistically, and this strong connection can be seen in a number of passages throughout Acts.[211]

This element of Luke's characterization is crucial for properly understanding what Barr calls "the complete absence of support adduced from the history, the law, and the experiences of Israel."[212] As elsewhere in Acts, Luke depicts Paul using the words of the LXX and the themes of the OT worldview in order to make his argument. This is the case in Acts 17 despite the fact the Paul does not *explicitly* cite or enumerate Scripture, nor appeal to its authority, in his speech to the Athenians. In fact, such an appeal or citation would be useless in the current context, as Paul speaks to an audience having no background in the Scriptures. Witherington notes that "it would have done Paul no good to simply quote the Scriptures, a book the audience did not know and one that had no authority in the minds of these hearers. Arguments are only persuasive if they work within the plausibility structure existing in the minds of the hearers."[213] But this does not mean that Paul abandons the OT. Israel's first words from God deal with the theme of

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26). Barr concludes that exegesis of Acts 17 does support the existence and use of natural theology, but only one that is undefined: "the argumentation of the Areopagus speech shows a clear affinity with principles that would normally be counted as belonging to natural theology" (Barr, 26). While Barr sometimes seems to put forward the non-sequitur that successful repudiation of Barth's position necessarily leads to the conclusion that the Bible supports natural theology, it is not the intent of this paper to examine Barth's position in any detail. Rather, the focus will be on whether Barr's exegetical conclusions regarding Acts 17 can be supported when the speech is examined in light of Luke's narrative characterization of Paul, the Athenians, and the change in redemptive era, as they are found in Acts.

[210]Section V.

[211]See section V for examples.

[212]Barr, 25.

[213]Witherington, 530.

God as creator; Paul describes God as creator in Acts 17:24-25 using language very similar to the LXX of Gen. 1:1, Ex. 20:11, and Is. 42:5.[214] The following chart shows the similarities:

Acts 17:24	ὁ θεὸς ὁ ποιήσας τὸν κόσμον καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ, οὗτος οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὑπάρχων κύριος . . .
Gen. 1:1	Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν.
Ex. 20:11	ἐν γὰρ ἓξ ἡμέραις ἐποίησεν κύριος τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς . . .
Is. 42:5[215]	οὕτως λέγει κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ πήξας αὐτόν, ὁ στερεώσας τὴν γῆν καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ καὶ διδοὺς πνοὴν τῷ λαῷ τῷ ἐπ' αὐτῆς καὶ πνεῦμα τοῖς πατοῦσιν αὐτήν

It has already been noted how the phrase found in Acts 17:14 is very similar to a stock liturgical phrase found in Acts 4:24, and the above commentary for vv. 16, 24-25, 26-27, 28, and 31 show further OT references, including the important thematic connections surrounding "dwelling in temples" and "creating out of one."[216]

Luke also describes Paul's actions with reference to the OT. As noted in the commentary for v. 16, Paul's spirit is παρωξύνετο . . . ἐν αὐτῷ when he observes the idolatry of the Athenians. Section V above describes how this language exactly reflects that of several OT passages which describe God's reaction to the idolatry of his people.

Barr's statement that the Areopagus speech shows "the complete absence of support adduced from the history, the law, and the experiences of Israel"[217] is therefore only superficially true. It is true that Paul does not explicitly build an argument from cited Scripture, but only because of the specific audience to which he is speaking. However, Paul's message at Athens, down to the very words, is drawn from the LXX,

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[214]As noted in the commentary for vv. 24-25, and Barrett, 2:839.
[215]Note also the very close linguistic and conceptual connection between Is. 42:5 and the completion of Paul's thought in the following verse, Acts 17:25.
[216]See, for example, the commentary for vv. 16, 24-25.
[217]Barr, 25.

that is, the Greek language version of "the history, the law, and the experiences of Israel."[218]

The second "peculiar feature" of the Acts 17 Areopagus address which bears an affinity to natural revelation, according to Barr, is "the strong universalism, with God seen as determining the bounds and times for *all* human peoples."[219] The word "universalism" can here only mean that God is seen as the God of everyone, and not only of Israel. That this is what Barr intends is evident from the conjoined clause ("God seen as determining the bounds and times for *all* human peoples").[220] Though Barr includes this as a "peculiar feature," this doctrine is certainly not strange to the Old Testament. The LORD's words to Moses in Ex. 19:5 make clear that God is not merely interested in, nor limits his focus to, the nation of Israel. This prologue to the Ten Commandments is one of the most famous passages of Old Testament Scripture.[221] As God describes the role of Israel and the covenant, and their relation to the larger world, he tells Moses that כי־לי כל־הארץ, "the whole earth belongs to me" (Ex. 19:5). That God was responsible for the various areas in which men were to live can be seen in Gen. 11:8, "So the LORD dispersed them from there over all the face of the earth . . . ." Even more compelling is Deut. 32:8 (LXX), where Moses says that God ἔστησεν ὅρια ἐθνῶν, "set the boundaries of the nations," strikingly similar language to that of Paul in v. 26. Isaiah, after giving an oracle against Judah and Israel in chapter 9, makes clear in 10:13 (LXX) that God controls not only the territory of those two nations but even that of Assyria; this time God says that ἀφελῶ ὅρια ἐθνῶν, "I remove the boundaries of the peoples." Finally Daniel's

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[218]Ibid.
[219]Ibid.
[220]Ibid.
[221]That is to say, this doctrine is not one that must be strained out of an obscure text – it is part of God's 'purpose statement' for Israel, prepended to his famous declaration of law.

prayer, found in Dan. 2:21, says of God that αὐτὸς ἀλλοιοῖ καιροὺς καὶ χρόνους, μεθιστῶν βασιλεῖς καὶ καθιστῶν. Clearly, Paul's language and sentiment regarding God as the determiner of the boundaries of all nations is rooted in Old Testament beliefs and language, and not an appeal to natural theology as defined by Barr.

Barr further lists as "peculiar" Paul's reference to the "clear prospect that any of these [humans] might feel after him and find him."[222] Elsewhere Barr comments, "this hope or chance is not a completely remote or impossible fancy: for he, though transcendent, is not far from each of us."[223] But, close exegetical consideration of v. 27 casts doubt on Barr's optimism.

The verse which is the clear referent for Barr's statement (v. 27) provides a rare NT occurrence of an optative mood verb; in fact, two optatives are used: ψηλαφήσειαν and εὕροιεν.[224] In this sentence, the optatives are preceded by εἰ. Wallace notes that this construction of "εἰ + the optative mood" is evidence of a fourth-class conditional statement, which describes a "less probable future" or "usually a remote possibility."[225] It is clear that God intends man to seek for him (ζητεῖν at the beginning of v. 27 is an infinitive showing purpose), but it is by no means clear that man can, or will, succeed in finding God unaided by the renewal of Jesus Christ or by preaching. Moreover, classical references for the word ψηλαφάω indicate that this words connotes "fumbling around in the dark" or "groping blindly." In the *Phaedo* Socrates makes for his listeners the critical

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[222]Barr, 25.
[223]Ibid., 24.
[224]For a description of the use of the optative in the New Testament, see Wallace 480-84. In this section Wallace describes how the use of the optative, much more common in the Classical period, was more and more collapsed into the subjunctive by the time of the Koine. Therefore, Wallace argues, the use of the optative by a New Testament author was deliberate and should merit special attention. The writings of Luke contain a very high percentage of the optative; the use in this passage might be due to Lukan idiom, to an intentional effort on Paul's part to find common sentiment in classical reference, or to an idiomatic construction stating a fourth-class conditional statement (or, possibly, to all three).
[225]Wallace, 699.

distinction between a *moral* cause and a *physical cause*; anyone, he says, who confuses the latter for the former is ψηλαφῶντες . . . ἐν σκότει, "groping in the dark."[226] Likewise, in the *Odyssey,* the Cyclops, stabbed in the eye and blinded, χεσρὶ ψηλαφόων, "felt about with his hands."[227] In both of these cases, the subject is "feeling about" because of impaired sight, whether physical or intellectual. Far from being "a clear prospect that any of these might feel after him and find him,"[228] the grammatical clues and the connotation of these words point to an unlikely fulfillment.

The fourth feature which Barr believes implies a natural theology in this passage is "the conjunction of the high transcendence of the deity and his close presence and immanence."[229] Though Barr does not list citations, it is evident that "high transcendence" is supported most clearly by v. 24, and immanence by vv. 27-28. For the first, as noted in the commentary, the phrase ὁ θεὸς ὁ ποιήσας τὸν κόσμον καὶ πάντα τά ἐν αὐτῷ is so similar to a variety of Old Testament uses as to almost constitute a stock phrase. Paul's language regarding God's dwelling in a temple is even more telling: οὐκ ἐν χειροποιήτοις ναοῖς κατοικεῖ. The language and sentiment are reminiscent of Solomon's Prayer at the dedication of the temple (found in I Kings 8), an Old Testament passage which clearly indicates *both* God's transcendence and his immanence. The temple, like the tabernacle before it, was always to be a reminder of God's presence in the midst of his people (immanence) as Solomon acknowledges in his Prayer; in v. 27 (LXX) he relates this to God's transcendence:

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[226]This translation is from Harold North Fowler in the Loeb edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 340/341.
[227]Homer *Odyssey* 9.416.
[228]Barr, 25.
[229]Ibid.

> ὅτι εἰ ἀληθῶς κατοικήσει ὁ θεός μετὰ ἀνθρώπων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; εἰ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς τοῦ οὐρανοῦ οὐκ ἀρκέσουσίν σοι, πλὴν καὶ ὁ οἶκος οὗτος, ὃν ᾠκοδόμησα τῷ ὀνόματί σου;

Isaiah 57:15 clearly describes both God's transcendence and his immanence in one short section:

> For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
> who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy;
> "I dwell in the high and holy place,
> and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
> to revive the spirit of the lowly,
> and to revive the heart of the contrite."[230]

These references point to an Old Testament referent for Paul's explanation of God's transcendence and immanence.

Barr also notes that the idea of God's immanence in the speech is found in "the idea that we live and move and have our being within him."[231] Elsewhere Barr relates this passage to the following statement: "God is the all-encompassing medium, it seems, which surrounds and envelops us all . . . . Throughout the statement 'we' includes Greeks and others, all humanity is together in this."[232] Paul does in fact use 'we' to refer to all humanity, both Jews and Gentiles (the subject of the first person plural verbs in v. 28 should be related to ἑνὸς ἑκάστου ἡμῶν in v. 27). However, Barr's statement that "God is the all-encompassing medium . . . which surrounds and envelops us all"[233] does not clearly describe the type of knowledge God's immanence conveys. Barr's statement is too close to representing man's relationship to God in physical/spatial terms; this would be pantheism. However, from the context of the surrounding material in the speech, it is evident that Paul is speaking of man's relationship to God in personal/relational terms, describing God's creation, providence, and sustenance of man. Gärtner concludes that

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[230]ESV translation – this translation is based on the MT; the LXX does not have the middle line.
[231]Barr, 25.
[232]Ibid., 24.
[233]Ibid.

this sentence is meant to describe "man's absolute dependence on God."[234] H.P. Owen says that "the idea that men by nature live 'in' God cannot be found in any Greek or Jewish source,"[235] and Owen cites Gärtner's study for a more detailed explanation. "Furthermore," says Owen, "the assertion that all men are near God because their dependence on him is both intelligible in itself and a fitting sequence to the proclamation of God as One who gives 'to all men life and breath and everything.'"[236]

There is no reason to conclude, however, that the dependent relationship that man has with God is necessarily redemptive. Paul makes clear that there is something wrong with this relationship in its natural state. The surrounding context of the speech shows that, though man is in a relationship of dependence on God, man has to this point (the time of Paul's message) lived in ignorance (v. 30); Paul says that God now "commands all people everywhere to repent" (v. 30). Paul adds that a day of judgment has also been set by God (v. 31). Repentance and judgment imply sin; the fact that all men everywhere are called to repent implies that all men everywhere are sinful. This explanation of what Paul means in v. 28 is in line with what the reader is told by Luke elsewhere; it is unnecessary to posit "natural theology" as the source of Paul's doctrine of immanence.

Finally, "the idea that, though repentance is now demanded, faults of earlier times are to be overlooked,"[237] must be viewed in light of the changed redemptive situation described by Luke.[238] Luke represents Paul as referring to the earlier times in the pagan world as the "times of ignorance." Apart from the special revelation of the Old Testament, and also the 'special' message of which Paul is an authorized messenger, there

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[234]Gärtner, 189.
[235]Owen, 136.
[236]Ibid.
[237]Barr, 25.
[238]It is also consistent with Paul's thought as it is revealed elsewhere (e.g. Rom. 2:4 and 3:25).

is no real ground for repentance. Luke represents this aspect of Paul's message consistently; Paul makes the same argument both at Lystra (Acts 14:14-17) and here at Athens. Moreover, the idea of repentance is crucial to this statement; the former times of ignorance have been overlooked, τὰ νῦν God calls all people to repentance. The whole reason for overlooking past faults was in order to bring people to repentance. This theme can also be found in the Old Testament in relation to repentance from idolatry. Isaiah 30:18-22 relates how God is patient; though he hates idolatry, he does not punish it immediately and fully, as he desires to bring people to repentance, and have them turn to him. This doctrine is not simply natural; it is part of Paul's message as a special messenger of Christ, and wholly consistent with the Old Testament description of God.

When Luke's characterizations of speaker, audience, and time in the Acts narrative are considered, the Areopagus address cannot be said to reflect a natural theology as Barr describes it. Luke's description of Paul, the Athenians, and the changed redemptive era provide significant insight into the meaning of the speech. Isolating certain elements of the speech leads to a skewed exegesis. Barrett concludes that "from nature the Greeks have evolved not natural theology but natural idolatry."[239] The first part of Barr's definition of natural theology - "just be being human beings, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, . . . and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God"[240] - might be said to be partially supported by the text, but is insufficient in light of Paul's call to repentance. The second part, however, that natural theology means that "valid talk about God without any appeal whatever to special revelation is possible and indeed highly

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[239]Barrett, 2:850-51.
[240]Barr, 1.

significant and important"[241] is not only unsupported by Acts 17, it is contradicted by it. Paul's emphasis on idolatry in the speech shows that this is the inevitable result of the natural inklings regarding God in man; ignorance is here closely related to idolatry. Special revelation is clearly needed to escape from ignorance. The natural capacity to know God can *only* begin to function properly in light of the special message which Paul brings, including repentance. Moreover, the call to repentance in v. 30 means that a change is needed in the will of man, and not simply an addition to his knowledge. The passage points to a real faculty in man of knowing God; that faculty is inevitably corrupt without the special revelation of God in Christ, and cannot on its own make its way out of idolatry and ignorance.

[241] Ibid.

Van Til's Use of Acts 17 in *Paul at Athens*

For Cornelius Van Til, Paul's address to the Athenians is paradigmatic for authentic Christian apologetics. Van Til, in his booklet *Paul at Athens*, attempts to show how the Areopagus address answers the question: "How then shall the Reformed minister set off his preaching of Christ and the resurrection from that of the old and new modernism . . . ? Can he join the 'evangelical' in this matter?"[242] As for method, Van Til argues that "even at Athens Paul did virtually the same thing that he had done in Lystra; he challenged the wisdom of the world."[243] An analysis of Paul's preaching at Athens, Van Til asserts, will show that "half-way measures . . . will not suffice; the only method that will suffice is that of challenge of the wisdom of the world by the wisdom of God."[244] Van Til's exposition of Acts 17 is meant to show that "there can be no full preaching or speaking of the resurrection unless the entire framework of non-Christian thought be challenged."[245]

Van Til does not in this booklet provide a full grammatical or syntactical exegesis of the Areopagus speech. Instead, he focuses on Paul and the Athenians as the most important factors in the speech. In order to characterize Paul, Van Til relates Paul's theology as it is found in his letters to the speech in Acts 17, and compares Paul's approach in Lystra (Acts 14) to that in Athens. Van Til also gives an extensive paraphrase

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[242]Cornelius Van Til, *Paul At Athens*. Privately published by Lewis J. Grotenhuis, Phillipsburg, NJ, 18. There is no date listed for this publication within the booklet itself.
[243]Ibid., 13.
[244]Ibid., 14.
[245]Ibid., 18.

of Paul's speech, with the intent of clarifying Paul's message and method. With regard to the Athenians, Van Til provides a brief explanation of Greek thought. Van Til frequently refers to other NT Scripture in order to clarify the situation in Athens. However, Van Til's characterizations of Paul and his audience do not sufficiently account for Luke's characterizations, and he largely ignores Luke's emphasis on time in the Acts narrative. For example, Van Til's paraphrase of Paul's speech contains phrases like "Why are you seeking to weave the resurrection of Jesus Christ into the pattern of your immanentistic way of thinking"[246] and "I am teaching you of a philosophy of history in which there are no monstrosities."[247] These phrases, put into the mouth of Paul by Van Til in his paraphrase, sound very much like Van Til, but not much like Paul. They are in fact stock phrases in Van Tilian theology, recurring points of emphasis, and sometimes even technical terms.[248] Van Til does explain Acts 17 in terms of both the narrative context and the context of Paul's theology. He rightly attempts to place the Areopagus speech in its narrative context within Acts, as well as to show consistency in the content of the message with Paul's theology as it is found elsewhere. However, the selective way in which Van Til examines the contextual evidence collapses the distinctives of the Areopagus address. The result is a monolithic Paul with a monolithic message; Van Til brings in contextual evidence in a way that overrides the distinct features of the Areopagus address. Three examples will suffice to show this.

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[246]Ibid., 8.
[247]Ibid., 11.
[248]This is not to say that Van Til's views on an "immanentistic way of thinking" and a "philosophy of history" are necessarily wrong or unimportant. Here, however, he has put them into the mouth of Paul, paraphrasing Paul's speech as if Paul himself spoke in these terms.

Van Til rightly views the preaching of Paul to the Lystrans in Acts 14 as highly relevant to the Acts 17 speech. The content of these two speeches is very similar.[249] The audiences found in these two pericopes are also very similar. However, Van Til does not closely examine either of these two factors. Van Til begins his exposition with a brief summary of Acts 14:14-19, concluding that "In a sense, this story of Paul's preaching at Lystra may be taken as typical of his entire method and attitude when preaching the gospel . . . ."[250] While he does not specify in what sense Acts 14 should be taken as typical, it becomes clear that the element that carries over, for Van Til, is the fact that Paul "would rend his clothes."[251] "Challenge" becomes the central element in Paul's preaching. Van Til says that "the Apostle Paul was fully determined never to have his message subtly interwoven with that of those who worshiped and served the creature . . . . He would rend his clothes and call upon men not to confuse his message with that of the priests of Jupiter, with the highest being of Plato, or the 'thought thinking itself' of Aristotle."[252] At Athens, Van Til says, Paul "did the equivalent of what he did in the presence of the men of Lystra. Again he tore his garments, this time figuratively. Again he said in effect, 'Sirs why do ye do these things? Why are you seeking to weave the resurrection of Jesus Christ into the pattern of your immanentistic way of thinking?'"[253]

While clearly the messages given at Lystra and Athens are very similar in content, Van Til does not examine the content of the messages. Moreover, by collapsing the two into one, important differences are overlooked. In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas "tore their

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[249]Compare, for instance, Acts 14:15 with 17:24, 14:16 with 17:20, and 14:17 with 17:25.
[250]Van Til, 2.
[251]Ibid., 3
[252]Ibid.
[253]Ibid.

garments"[254] exactly at the time when priest of Zeus brought out oxen and garlands in preparation to sacrifice to this pair of men. In this situation Paul was prompted to *act* immediately in order to prevent such a perversion from occurring. At Athens however, while Paul is certainly provoked by the rampant idolatry, no one attempts to sacrifice to him, and his message does not reflect the same tone of urgency that was needed in Lystra in order prevent an immanent event. Van Til would have Paul begin immediately with a challenge to the Athenians; the actual beginning of Paul's speech is in fact very mild, laying out the groundwork for his topic. In the opening section of Paul's speech he uses the somewhat ambiguous word δεισιδαιμονεστέρους, actually inviting his listeners to continue listening in order to determine what Paul really means. Paul certainly rejects idolatry and calls his listeners to repentance, but his approach to the Athenians is courteous.

Van Til frequently quotes from I Corinthians as background for Paul's thought. The phrase "Paul was determined to know nothing among men save Jesus Christ and Him crucified"[255] appears several times with slight variation in Van Til's booklet. This statement is certainly indicative of Paul's message in that he consistently centered his preaching on Jesus. However, the actual reading of I Corinthians 2:2 is οὐ γὰρ ἔκρινά τι εἰδέναι ἐν ὑμῖν εἰ μὴ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν καὶ τοῦτον ἐσταυρωμένον; that is, "among *you*," meaning the Corinthians. The statement was directed to the Corinthian church; that audience was very different than the audience at Athens. The church at Corinth consisted of believing Christians. This group already had the basic teaching about Christ but was being tempted to look elsewhere for wisdom or knowledge; the theme of the first two

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[254]Acts 14:14.
[255]Van Til, 2. See also p. 8 and p. 13.

chapters of I Cor. might be summed up in 1:24, where Paul says that, in contrast with the false wisdom of the world, "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." The Corinthians are reminded that they need not seek elsewhere for knowledge: "in Christ Jesus . . . you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge."[256] Blaiklock says that

> the remark to the Corinthians must be seen in the context of the restrained irony which characterizes the first four chapters of the epistle. With the shallow intellectualism of the Corinthians, Paul was disposed to waste no time. He was not prepared to give them a Christianity diluted with their pseudo-philosophical ideas, or necessarily expressed in their attenuated terminology.[257]

In Athens, however, Paul faced a totally different audience, and a wholly different situation. The audience in Athens was *not* yet converted to Christ, and indeed had no background whatsoever in the Old Testament, and no knowledge of Christ as yet. This is in fact a missionary situation; the situation in Corinth was pastoral. In Corinth Paul has a personal background with his audience; he is able to refer to their own mutual personal history to remind them of the consistent message of Christ which he brought to them (I Cor. 2:1-2). In Athens Paul has no history with those to whom he speaks. The audience at Corinth has been enlightened as to Christ; Paul seeks to prevent them from falling back into darkness. The audience in Athens is still in the dark; Paul seeks to bring them into the light of Christ in the most effective way possible, and therefore uses terminology familiar to them in order to bring them to Jesus. Understanding this difference in audience helps to clarify the different thrust of the two messages to the Athenians and the Corinthians; Van Til applies Paul's word to the Corinthians to the Areopagus address in such a way as to ignore the significant differences.

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[256]I Cor. 1:4-5.
[257]Blaiklock, 190.

Van Til also says that in Athens Paul "did what later he did in his letter to the Corinthians when he said: 'Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.'"[258] Again it can be said that it is true that Paul at Athens confronted the "wisdom of the world" in its form of idolatry by exposing it as false. However, ignoring those to whom this was addressed again slurs over the different thrust in each of the two messages. The audience at Corinth was Christian; they had some knowledge of Christ. This entire quote is meant to reorient them to a truth which they already knew. The question "hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" is a rhetorical device, leading its listener to confirm its truth based on his own experience. The Athenians, however, had no such experience. This statement is meant to be slightly stinging, but it is part of a rebuke delivered in the context of a healthy relationship between Paul and his church, as if from a parent to a child. That relationship does not exist in Athens, and therefore such a remark, or an approach resembling it, would not be appropriate. This verse in Corinthians is entirely appropriate to the Corinthian church, but not at all to the mission situation in Athens.[259]

It is certainly true that Paul abandoned none of his loyalty to Christ in the speech to the Athenians. The content of his message was the same as always; he preached to the Athenians "Jesus and the resurrection." He confronted the sin of the Athenians, and claimed to bring light to their ignorance. However, Paul approached the Athenians in a

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[258]Van Til, 13.

[259]This does not, of course, mean that Paul did not believe this to be true of the Athenians; it is only that using these words to the Athenians would have been entirely inappropriate, whereas they were just right for the Corinthian situation. Van Til seems to imply that not only is Paul's message consistent, but that the words of the Athenian address should be governed by the words used to the Corinthians.

respectful and knowledgeable way, speaking gently but firmly, in the hope that the Holy Spirit would use his words for conviction and repentance. Blaiklock says that

> the whole address remains a model for those who seek in such circles to present the Christian faith, and a warning to those who, in misguided moments, have seen a virtue in crudity, and a loyalty to truth in a disrespect for the views, the habits of thought, and the attitudes of intelligent people who fail in all points to follow them. Confrontation there must be, if the popular word must be used again, but with preamble of courtesy, with the tolerance which is not incompatible with earnestness, and with the sincerest of efforts to see good where good has found a place. But what Paul was to call 'the offence of the cross' remains.[260]

The reason that Paul chooses this approach is because he believes that all humanity have the capacity to know God; according to Acts17:28-29, even pagan Athenians are the "offspring of God" as they have God for their creator.[261]

Finally, Van Til ignores the change in redemptive era as described by Luke. Luke describes the preaching of Christ by the apostles as marking a new age in which ignorance of God is dispelled. Luke makes clear that prior to the announcement of Christ to the pagans, there was an age of genuine ignorance. Paul says in Acts 17:30 that "previously God overlooked the times of ignorance." Van Til, however, has Paul say to the Athenians that "God, the true God, is not unknown to man at all. He is not unknown to you."[262] Paul does not say that God welcomed, allowed, or even excused idolatry, but he overlooked it among the pagan nations in that he did not punish it fully. Barrett says that "God did not will or approve this ignorant idolatrous worship, but he did not suppress it; he overlooked it . . . ."[263] God did not, however, overlook the idolatry of his own people. From the time that God initiated a covenant relationship with his people, he

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[260]Blaiklock, 190.
[261]Of course, genuine repentance and redemption are required.
[262]Van Til, 9.
[263]Barrett, 2:851.

punished his people for turning to idols, as in Exodus 32:35. The times of ignorance for Israel therefore ended some 1500 years before the Greeks. Van Til ignores this distinction, and represents Paul as preaching to the Athenians as if they were Israelites. Thus Van Til does not fully credit Luke's description of the Athenians as ignorant. Van Til represents Paul as saying to the Athenians, "It is but sham modesty when you speak of reverently bowing before the mysterious universe"[264] and "you must admit that it is only because you are seeking to hide the true state of affairs about yourself that you have erected this altar to the unknown god."[265] These statements do not consider the ignorance of the Athenians as genuine, and downplay the distinction between the former times of ignorance and the new era in Christ as made by Luke. Paul is represented by Van Til as preaching a *revivalist* sermon, merely calling men to repent based on knowledge that they ought to already have.[266]

Van Til's exposition of Acts 17 is meant to show that Paul at Athens was focused primarily on challenging worldly wisdom, an approach naturally to be imitated by Christian preachers. However, his exegesis is done by lumping together biblical texts without concern for their situational relevance. The end result of such an exegesis is monotonous; Acts 17 merely represents Paul as giving a standard evangelical sermon. Van Til does not accurately represent the methodological flexibility with which Luke characterizes Paul in Acts. Moreover, Van Til does not consider the ways in which the Athenian audience is distinct from Paul's other audiences, and the impact that this has on Paul's approach. While several other criticisms may be made of Van Til's examination of

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[264]Van Til, 9.
[265]*Ibid.*
[266]This is not to deny that Paul does appeal to knowledge already possessed by the Athenians, but this is not *all* Paul does; he clearly reveals something new to them, thereby acknowledging their ignorance.

Acts 17,[267] it is the attempt to muscle passages together without regard to context that leads to a skewed exegesis of the Areopagus address.

[267]For example, Van Til gives an outline of "Greek thought" which attempts to fit all of the variety of Greek philosophy into a two page summary, risking misrepresentation of Paul's audience. Also, Van Til's paraphrase of Paul's speech contains a large amount of anachronism.

Conclusion

Contextual clues within narrative are meant to guide the reader in understanding its individual parts. In the case of a highly irregular pericope, these contextual clues become even more important. Luke's characterization of speaker, audience, and time, both in the immediate context and the larger Acts narrative, provides important information for understanding the Areopagus speech. Luke shows Paul exemplifying a method of making the gospel known to a particular audience in a particular time, without abandoning the centrality of Christ. Failure to consider these elements leads to the types of exegesis exemplified in Barr and Van Til. The one results in a Paul who is insufficiently rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, preaching a gospel whose content can be explained without scriptural revelation. The other results in a Paul who pays little or no attention to the circumstances of his audience. Neither is consistent with Paul and his message. Instead, Luke represents Paul as consistently preaching Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, and as one who shows himself ready at all times to use the most effective rhetorical means to convict men of their sin and point them to Jesus.

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