

# Making Known the Unknown God

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The video version is at: <https://youtu.be/2Ebl66SYTlg>

The scripture reading is Acts 17:16-32

Paul's journey from Berea to Athens and the difference between these two cities marks as stark a contrast as any to be found among the journeys of Paul and the other apostles. Berea was a place where Paul's message of the Good News of the kingdom of Messiah and the salvation granted to the Gentiles was accepted and embraced by the local Jewish community. Paul had appealed to them, and they searched the scripture for themselves.

Acts 17:11 NKJV 11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

Athens, on the other hand, was a completely different animal. There was a Jewish population in Athens and a synagogue or two, but mindful of his mission to the Gentiles, Paul took a bold step into the quagmire of a city obsessed with all the varied philosophies of humanist origin and the birthplace of the most prominent of pagan philosophies and gods.

Athens was and is one of the most famous cities in the world. In Paul's day it was the epicenter of Hellenism and was known, along with Tarsus and Alexandria, as a center of arts and education. But above all, Athens was known for its schools of philosophy, science, mathematics, arts, history, rhetoric, and culture. Much of the things we would view today as the "liberal arts."

We may find it difficult to comprehend in today's world where academia is filled with religious cynicism, in Paul's day these liberal arts and philosophies were not found to be amoral or areligious in nature, but on the contrary, Athens, was home to more gods than any other city in the ancient world. This fact weighed heavily on Paul as he entered and toured the city.

Acts 17:16 NKJV 16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.

The ancient city of Athens which we see today is nearly completely obliterated and in ruin. But Paul would have seen its full splendor and incredible architecture; The Acropolis, the Parthenon, the Odeion, temples to Zeus, Apollo, Ares, Athena and many more.

Just to the northwest of the city center sat Mars Hill, known as the Areopagus. Mars Hill was the epicenter of politics and philosophy. As Paul toured the city, he would have witnessed first-hand the Athenian's deeply religious devotion to the Olympian gods right along side of the hundreds of adopted gods from other nations. Athens was crowded with a literal forest of statues, altars and finely painted murals, all dedicated to these gods.

Paul grew up in Tarsus, another of the prominent pagan cities of the ancient world and would be intimately familiar with the pagan philosophies permeating the society of his day, but Athens was an order of magnitude beyond the ordinary. Paul may have been overwhelmed and saddened by what he observed in Athens. As Paul toured in and around the city of Athens encountering the statues, altars, painted murals, and inscriptions

dedicated to every god imaginable, he perhaps thought of the Greek historian and philosopher Petronius who opined that Athens, "is so well stocked of deities, you will easier meet with a god than a man."<sup>1</sup>

As Paul traveled the city, as was his custom, he went to the synagogue of the Jewish community as well as the public areas of the city.

Acts 17:17 NKJV 17 Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.

Luke's focus on Paul's exploits in Athens says little of his success or failure within the Jewish community. Instead Luke's focus in Acts chapter seventeen is Paul's attempts to bring the message of the one true God and the gospel of salvation to the pagan Gentiles of Athens.

Acts 17:18-21 NKJV 18 Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? 20 "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." 21 For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

We are not told, but it appears that Paul was in Athens speaking, teaching, and debating the locals for some time before he was once again accused of disturbing the local status quo and brought before the city authorities. There was never an attempt to beat him or place him in jail as happened several times prior.

How was Paul to answer this time? It does appear that Paul only faced serious questions from the city leaders. As he was about to speak, Paul remembered something he saw in the city.

Acts 17:22-23 NKJV 22 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 "for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:

On this altar and inscription to an unknown god, perhaps Paul saw an opening and an opportunity to bring the gospel message to the city leaders directly. With his educational background and experience in dealing with the pagan Gentiles, Paul was ready to debate them on their own turf.

Verse eighteen mentions the were two major philosophies underlying the polytheism of Athens. The first were the Epicureans. This philosophy was founded by Epicurus around three hundred BC. Epicureans were naturalists who dismissed the supernatural, divine intervention, and divine revelation. They were moderate hedonists, but discouraged overindulgence, not because they felt it was wrong, but that it could lead to later suffering and pain. They gravitated toward simple pleasures and intellectual satisfaction. They discouraged marriage because it could lead to the destruction of one's peace of mind. They rejected the afterlife and mysticism in all forms. Epicureans believed that man need not fear gods because they are irrelevant to human existence.

The second were the Stoics. Stoicism was very popular in the time of Paul. First Fruits of Zion in their work "Chronicles of the Apostles" describes the beliefs of the Stoics.

“Everyone and everything is part of God. Unhappiness, human evil, and moral depravity result from man’s ignorance of that sublime truth. Perfection and virtue can be obtained by a man who lives in oneness with the natural order and recognizes his part in the divine whole.”<sup>ii</sup>

Since the stoics felt that ignorance was the source of evil, they highly valued education and learning. They felt that truth could be discerned and achieved by logic and reason.

In debating the practitioners of these philosophies, Paul attempted to frame his arguments in terminology that they would understand. He borrowed concepts from Plato arguing for monotheism. From Stoicism he argued for personal ethics and self-control. From Epicureanism Paul argued against many of the popular notions and practices involved in worship of many of the Greco-Roman gods.

In trying to communicate the concepts of Jewish monotheism, Paul used a patchwork of one philosophy or another to illustrate the gospel message and the kingdom of God in their language. Paul sets out to introduce them to their “Unknown God.”

Paul begins by introducing them to a transcendent and self-sufficient God.

Acts 17:24-25 NKJV 24 "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. 25 "Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.

Paul does not want to be written off as a mere Hellenist Jew espousing Jewish philosophical ideas in a “Greek” context. Paul describes God as being utterly transcendent in that He does not reside in temples made of stone like the other idols of Athens. He states in verse twenty-five that their Unknown God is the creator of all life and does not require anything from His creation. It is this God alone who “gives to all life, breath, and all things,” taking a quote directly from Plato. The Athenians would be well acquainted with Plato’s concept of monotheistic deity. Josephus noted that there were many Greek philosophers who arrived at similar conclusions.

“God is unbegotten and unchanging through all eternity... Though he is known to us by his power, yet his essence is unknown to us. These notions of God are the sentiments of the wisest among the Greeks... Plato and the Stoic philosophers that succeeded (him), and almost all the rest shared the same opinions and arrived at the same conclusions about the nature of God.”<sup>iii</sup>

Next in his words to the Athenians, Paul speaks of God’s providence over all humanity.

Acts 17:26 NKJV 26 "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings,

Paul’s argument is that all human beings originate from one. The ambiguity of his words would lead the Athenians to a connection with the Stoics who believe that all human beings share a common origin. In the Jewish mindset, Paul’s statement may elude to the story of Babel, or to Deuteronomy which deals with the division of the nations.

Deuteronomy 32:8-9 NKJV 8 When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, When He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples According to the number of the children of Israel. 9 For the LORD'S portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance.

Paul tells them it is ingrained in our humanity to seek the one true God.

Acts 17:27 NKJV 27 "so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;

Humans naturally seek their creator, and without divine revelation, merely grope around in the dark. The point of Paul's statement is that there is a revelation inherent in creation itself. Paul later explains this concept in Romans.

Romans 1:19-20 NKJV 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,

Next Paul speaks of the divine presence of God.

Acts 17:28 NKJV 28 "for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

In these two verses, Paul quotes a couple of Greek odes to Zeus to make his point. One is from Epimenides and the other from Aratus. Why would Paul use the words from pagan, Greek literature? It was quite obvious from his previous experience in dealing with a purely pagan Gentile population in Lystra, that speaking in Jewish terms to the Athenians would be entirely foreign to them and incomprehensible. In Lystra, Paul himself was mistaken for the incarnation of the god Hermes and Silas for Zeus. By citing literature familiar to them, Paul was using proper rhetorical techniques in hopes of them making proper connections. He later explained to the Corinthians his motivations for this approach.

1 Corinthians 9:21 NKJV 21 to those who are without law (torah), as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law;

Paul next explains the hypocrisy and folly of their idolatry.

Acts 17:29 NKJV 29 "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

The Stoics already believed in an ethereal nature or notion of God. But if on the one hand, they dismissed the polytheism and idol worship of their world, as the Stoic philosophy would imply, why, on the other hand, would they continue to practice it?

Man is the created thing, he is not the creator. The prophet Isaiah in chapter 44 speaks that the one true God cannot be an image formed by the art and thoughts of man.

Isaiah 44:9-10 NKJV 9 Those who make an image, all of them are useless, And their precious things shall not profit; They are their own witnesses; They neither see nor know, that they may be ashamed. 10 Who would form a god or mold an image That profits him nothing?

Having laid out his case using words from their own literature and philosophies, Paul now concludes with his call to repentance, pointing out the coming judgment and ultimate resurrection.

Acts 17:30-31 NKJV 30 "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 "because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

God declared to all men that they should repent and prepare themselves for the day of judgment. Paul tries to explain to the Athenians that God appointed a single man to carry out this judgment and provided the evidence for this appointment by raising him from the dead. Without mentioning Israel or Yeshua, or the Messianic kingdom, Paul had attempted to communicate the gospel message to them outside of a Jewish context.

It was at this point in Paul's speech where he failed to get through to them. Paul's attempt to repackage the Gospel message to something acceptable to the Athenians fell short in several ways. They found the concept of resurrection from the dead to be so foreign to their way of thinking to be laughable. The Epicureans could not even fathom the ideas of repentance, final judgment, and life after death. The Stoics found the concept that the universe, which in the Stoic philosophy is God, to pass judgment on itself to be the epitome of absurdity.

Paul soon realized that his arguments were fruitless and there was no point in continuing further.

Acts 17:32-33 NKJV 32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." 33 So Paul departed from among them.

Where did Paul go wrong? Should he have taken the same approach as that of Philo of Alexandria? Who was known best by framing Judaism and the scriptures in terms of philosophical allegory instead of a more literal interpretation? Some of the leaders of the city offered Paul the opportunity to return and speak at a later time, but Paul refused, cutting his losses and counting his failure as a lesson learned. Paul realized that his attempt to communicate with the Athenians, and bring the gospel of salvation through Messiah Yeshua, in a framework of Greek philosophy, was a complete waste of time. Yet all was not lost at Athens. Paul did have some success. Probably within the Jewish community and among the God-fearers.

Acts 17:34 NKJV 34 However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Dionysius was definitely a Greek. No Jewish mother or father would have named their son after the Greek god of wine. Church tradition says that Damaris was the wife of Dionysius.

Paul did his best to properly teach these new believers while he waited for the arrival of Silas and Timothy from Berea. Paul never returned to the marketplace in Athens to further debate the Athenians and once the others joined him, Paul quickly left Athens never to return. Yeshua Himself taught us to take the gospel to the cities where we are welcome, and to shake the dust off our feet and move on where we are not. This seems to be exactly what Paul had done at Athens.

What is the greater lesson to be learned from Paul's experience here? Should we continue to take the message of the gospel to all the nations even when the odds for success are against us? Yeshua gave us the Great Commission to take the message to all nations. We are not responsible for the outcome, but we need to keep sharing the message and let the Holy Spirit do the heavy lifting.

Study Questions:

1. Paul grew up in Tarsus, another strongly pagan city in the ancient world. How would his early life and educational background prepare him for his journey to take the gospel to the Gentiles?
2. Compare the experiences of Paul and his traveling companions in the various cities to which they have traveled thus far? What were the reactions of the local populations to his gospel message?

3. Paul used the words from Greek philosophers and poets to describe attributes of God, in doing so, did Paul fall into a form of idolatry himself? Is this any different than building an actual physical idol and calling it God, much like the Children of Israel did when they built the Golden Calf and called it “Adonai?”
4. The two major philosophical lifestyles embraced by the Athenians were the Epicureans and the Stoics. In what ways do we observe aspects of these philosophies manifested today in general as well as how they have infiltrated the body of believers?
5. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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<sup>i</sup> Petronius, Satyricon 3/xvii

<sup>ii</sup> FFOZ Chronicles of the Apostles, D. Thomas Lancaster, Vol. 2 p555

<sup>iii</sup> Flavius Joseph, Against Apion 2:167-168/xvii