

Excerpts of Archived Lecture:

The Times of Ignorance: Paul @Athens

By Phil Roberts

INTRODUCTION:

The elements of Athenian culture which had the greatest effect on Paul's proclamation of the gospel in that city were idolatry and philosophy.

I. The Idolatry Of The Athenians Was Proverbial.

II. The Stoic And Epicurean Schools Of Philosophy Provided An Opportunity To Contrast The Gospel With The Failures Of Pagan Wisdom.

- A. Greek philosophy had failed to resolve the question of the nature of the universe.
- B. Greek philosophy had failed to resolve the question of the purpose of man's existence.
- C. Greek philosophy had failed to resolve the question of certainty of truth.
- D. Greek philosophy had failed to resolve the question of ethics.

III. There Are Two Principal Interpretations Of Paul's Address In Athens.

- A. Paul's address has often been interpreted as an attempt to harmonize the gospel with Stoic philosophy.
- B. Paul's address has been correctly interpreted as a proclamation of the historical revelation of the creator God.

IV. The Apologetic Force Of Paul's Address Is Dependent Upon The Historical Interpretation.

- A. The historical interpretation permits a solution to the question of the nature of the universe.
- B. The historical interpretation permits a solution to the question of the purpose of man's existence.
- C. The historical interpretation permits a solution to the question of ethics.
- D. The historical interpretation permits a solution to the question of certainty of knowledge.

V. The Same Historical Approach Used By The Apostle Paul Must Be Used Today If We Are To Be Successful In Countering The Philosophical Skepticism Of Our Times.

THE TIMES OF IGNORANCE: PAUL IN ATHENS

Phil Roberts*

IDOLATRY AND PHILOSOPHY IN ATHENS

When the apostle Paul entered the city of Athens in 50 A.D., he must certainly have been aware of the impending confrontation. The altars, the temples, and the statues which artistically enshrined the gods of Greek mythology gave overwhelming testimony to the idolatry of the city. And through his own education, the great apostle would certainly have anticipated the philosophical skepticism of the Athenians. No city of the Roman empire could have provided a setting more appropriate for a portrayal of the confrontation of the gospel and pagan wisdom.

Concerning the idolatry of the Athenians, we are told that Paul's "spirit was provoked within him as he beheld the city full of idols" (Acts 17:16). It seems somewhat incongruous to us that the city of idolatry should also be the city of philosophy. But, despite the protests of some philosophers, the two were inextricably wedded, and the idolatry of the Athenians was just as proverbial as their wisdom. A Roman satirist was even prompted to remark that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man, though his comment was probably aimed more at the paucity of manhood than the abundance of idols.

It was Paul's venturing into the marketplace, the very Agora of Socrates, that provided Luke the opportunity to introduce the role of Greek philosophy in the confrontation, for it was there, we are told, that "certain also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him" (17:18). It is a mistake to regard this mention of the Stoics and Epicureans as an incidental gloss of local color, for it was the confrontation with them that led directly to Paul's address before the council of the Areopagus.

While there were at least five competing schools of philosophy in Athens in Paul's day, it was specifically the Stoics and Epicureans who had developed the systems that would provide the most comprehensive contrast between the gospel and the whole scope of Greek philosophy. For centuries Greek philosophy had sought to answer such fundamental questions as the nature of the universe, the purpose of life, how to achieve certainty of knowledge, and how to determine right from wrong. And in each case, Greek philosophy had failed to provide any convincing or lasting answers. The Stoics and Epicureans simply represented the opposite extremes to which Greek philosophy had degenerated in its futile efforts to resolve such questions.

Concerning the nature of the cosmos, both schools were limited by the **Greek notion of the eternity of matter**. Yet, from this common starting point they each took off in opposite directions. The Epicureans, heirs of the atomist traditions of Greek philosophy, held to a consistently materialistic view of the universe. Even “souls” were material to them. The Stoics, on the other hand, tried to disguise their materialism with the “god-language” of an essentially Eastern pantheism. Yet their “God” was nothing personal at all. Rather, it was only a sort of universal principle of natural law and unbending reason. They spoke often of a divine providence guiding the universe, but by that they meant no more than a rigid working out of the universal laws of nature and reason.

In both schools, however, the concept of the eternity of matter precluded any idea of creation or final judgment. The Epicureans considered the present state of the universe nothing more than an accident—a fortuitous concourse of atoms that were apt to fly apart any minute. The Stoics thought of the universe as moving through a rigid series of repetitive cycles, but having no particular direction or end in sight.

With such views of the nature of the universe, it is little wonder that both groups had difficulty explaining the purpose of man’s existence in that universe. The Epicurean solution is well known: “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” This was, of course, tantamount to a denial of any purpose to man’s existence. But at least the conclusion seemed to follow from the premises. Not so with the Stoics. From the same premise of the inevitability of death,⁵ they concluded that the purpose of man ought to be to conform his life to the universal principle of reason, deny any passions that might deter him, accept his fate, and “take it like a man.” The insufficiency of this solution is amply underscored by the suicides of the two founders of Stoicism, along with the later suicides of the two greatest exponents of Roman Stoicism.

The contrast between Stoicism and Epicureanism also manifests itself in the critical philosophical question of the theory of knowledge (epistemology). The Stoics, predictably, relied heavily on logic as the key to certainty. And just as predictably, the Epicureans appealed to sense perceptions as the key, ridiculing the Stoic reliance on logic. But neither group was actually able to draw any closer to a solution for this problem than any other system had been, and this lack of certainty became a plague, not only on Greek philosophy, but on all Greek culture.

With regard to the question of ethics, we find a most paradoxical situation. Though “ethics” is a Greek word conveying to us the idea of moral action, the **Greeks had no concept of morality and sin as we know it**. Yet ethics, as the Greeks understood the term, was the very bone and marrow of Stoic philosophy. And a casual reading of a Stoic such as Seneca or Marcus Aurelius will provide an impressive collection of ethical maxims and exhortations superficially resembling much of the New Testament.

A similarity of terms should not mislead us. Greek notions of right and wrong were not based on a *moral* standard at all. To the Stoics the standard of right and wrong was only a conformity to the universal law of reason. Thus “goodness” and “badness” were only intellectual terms, and not moral ones.

The Epicureans’ solution to the question of ethics proved even less convincing. Their standard was pleasure. That which produced the most pleasure and the greatest peace of mind was good. **That which failed to produce pleasure and disturbed peace of mind was evil.** Again, there was nothing there that could be identified as distinctly moral.

It should also be pointed out that Greek theology was not able to contribute anything at all to the solution of these problems. This was primarily a result of the fact that the gods of the Greek pantheon were not creators, but creatures. They were not transcendent, but were themselves only a part of the cosmos. Consequently, they could provide no help in explaining the nature of the cosmos. The cosmos had been here longer than they had. For the same reason, they were unable to explain the purpose of man’s existence in the cosmos. Furthermore, they could give no certainty about anything, for they never really spoke from the lofty heights of Mount Olympus. And least of all could they provide any direction for ethics inasmuch as their moral standards were generally as bad or worse than those of their human counterparts. In sum, since they were just another part of the material cosmos, they could be manipulated to suit whatever system a philosopher might devise. And thus - the Stoics and Epicureans treated them, the Stoics making a pantheistic adaptation of them, and the Epicureans relegating them to such obscurity that they were popularly designated atheists.

I have dealt at some length here with the Stoics and Epicureans. This is not because their systems are especially notable in the history of philosophy (though Stoicism was considerably more important than Epicureanism). They are, in fact, rather poor systems. But in that fact, they are important representatives of the inevitable direction of Greek philosophy. The systems of Aristotle and Plato were much more formidable than those of the Stoics and Epicureans. But if Aristotle and Plato had really had the answers, there would probably never have been any Stoics and Epicureans. Thus, these two schools, in spite of their relative insignificance, provided a monumental testimony to the impotence of Greek philosophy at the time Paul entered the city of Athens.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF PAUL’S ADDRESS

But here we must digress for just a moment. For the opinion of a considerable portion of modern scholarship is that Paul did not in fact confront the failures of this pagan philosophy of Athens at all. Ever since the publication of Martin Dibelius’ 1939 monograph on Paul’s Areopagus address, it has been customary to view the speech as an attempt to harmonize Greek philosophy, and especially Stoic philosophy, with the gospel. This interpretation is enhanced by two factors.

First, Paul's home was Tarsus, and Tarsus had long been recognized as a leading center of Stoic learning. Second, there are a number of phrases in the speech that have a distinctly Stoic ring to them.¹⁰ For example, the statement "in him we live, and move, and have our being" is said to be the clearest possible expression of Stoic pantheism. Moreover, the argument of verses 26–27 is construed as nothing other than the Stoic form of the cosmological argument for the existence of God. The orderly arrangement of the seasons and the boundaries of the habitable zones in which man dwells are evidence of a divine reason or providence. And that, to the Stoics, was "God." Also, a commonplace in Stoic philosophy was the repudiation of temples and idols as expressed in verses 24–25. And the citation from Aratus that we are the offspring of God is likewise fundamental to the Stoic system.¹⁴ **Paul's speech is thus viewed as a concise summary of the natural theology of Stoicism, and on the basis of their own theology Paul pleads with the Athenians to forsake idolatry and apply their philosophical insights to the God of the Hebrew-Christian faith.** Thus, the statement that man was created to "seek after" God (v. 27) is interpreted in terms of a philosophical search for God. Moreover, the exhortation to repentance is understood only in the most sterile sense of the term *metanoia*. It is not moral repentance that Paul is alleged to be advocating, but only a slight philosophical reorientation.

This is the so-called "philosophical" interpretation of Paul's address. In essence, it says that Paul sought to reconcile the irreconcilable, and that he ended up prostituting the gospel to Stoic philosophy. He is alleged to have surrendered the distinctly Biblical proclamation of the historical revelation of God which characterized his earlier preaching in favor of the philosophical approach of the Athenians. And unfortunately, modern expositors have become so accustomed to applying their own "Christianized" version of Greek philosophy to theological issues that they often do not realize the inherent contradictions of such an approach. Indeed, Western apologists have actually tended to rely more heavily on arguments drawn from Greek philosophy than on the evidence of Scripture itself for verifying the Christian faith. And in so doing, not a few Biblical passages, including Paul's address here, have had a Greek philosophical interpretation illegitimately read into them.

THE HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF PAUL'S ADDRESS

But if the philosophical interpretation is not the correct approach to Paul's address, what is the proper explanation of his message? First and foremost, it is obviously a polemic against idolatry. But Paul did not choose idolatry as his point of attack just because he happened to see a lot of idols. Rather, he starts with the subject of idolatry because it is the supreme manifestation of the Athenians' ignorance of the true God. The true God was a creator God, and a creator God cannot reasonably be worshipped through mere creatures.

But the Greeks, in their philosophical wisdom, had utterly failed to arrive at a knowledge of such a creator God. Paul, therefore, proclaims this true God to the Athenians as the God who has revealed himself to man in history. This then is the “historical” approach as opposed to the philosophical. The following interpretation of Paul’s address is specifically designed to highlight the distinction between this historical approach and Dibelius’ philosophical approach.

Ye men of Athens, in all things I perceive that ye are very religious. This introductory remark is not to be regarded as a compliment paving the way for an acceptance of Stoicism by Paul. The older translation of “superstitious” is probably very near Paul’s actual evaluation of their religion. But the term is in fact ambiguous, and it appears that Paul here capitalizes on the ambiguity, arresting the attention of his audience without committing himself.

I found also an altar with this inscription, To An Unknown God. Critical fascination with the singular “God” has led many expositors to miss the proper emphasis of this reference. It is commonly asserted that only altars to unknown “gods” existed in Athens. And Paul, in the interest of harmonizing their philosophy with the singular God of Christianity, is said to have altered the inscription in his quotation. But Paul’s interest in the altar inscription is not based on either the singular or the plural form of the word “God.” His emphasis is on the word *Agnoōstō* (“unknown”), which is cognate with the word form “ignorance” in the following sentence. This play on words cannot be forcefully rendered into English. But the point is, Paul is not complimenting the Athenians for some near success in their attempts to reach God through philosophy. Rather, he is capitalizing on their own confession of ignorance.

“What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this I set forth unto you.” This is the statement determining direction of the rest of the speech.

And the key word is *katangellō*, “to proclaim.” No longer do we have the “dialogue” of the Agora. Paul is not calling on the Athenians to engage in a philosophical discussion with him. Rather, he is calling on them to hear his proclamation, the revelation of God through Jesus Christ which he as an apostle has been commissioned to give.

The God that made the world and all things therein. This is the supreme fact about God which the Greeks failed to perceive. Moreover, this is the fact that most prominently distinguishes the God of the Bible from the gods of Greece. The cosmos was composed of eternal matter, and the gods were locked into and controlled by the cosmos just as surely as men were. The idea of a transcendent God who actually created the whole cosmos was completely foreign to them. And it was a lack of knowledge of God as a creator distinct from his creation that led directly to pagan idolatry & worshipping of the creature rather than the Creator.

He, being Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is he served by men's hands, as though he needed anything. This is indeed comparable to statements made by Stoics, but it is a gross mistake to equate them, for they are founded on mutually exclusive premises. The Stoics eschewed temples and idolatry on the basis of their pantheistic conception of God (though drawing such a conclusion from that premise was not particularly convincing). Paul, on the other hand, appeals to the transcendent nature of the God who created all material things out of nothing as his basis for opposition to idolatry. And in so doing, Paul clearly shows that his approach is grounded, not in Stoic philosophy, but in the same Hebrew-Christian framework as 1 Kings 8:27; Isa. 66:1–2; and Psa. 50:9–13.

He made of one every nation of men to dwell on the face of the earth. This is not an appeal to Stoic cosmopolitanism. Still less is it to be construed as the beginning of an incomplete argument *e consensu genitum* for the existence of God. It is a simple assertion that the God of Paul's proclamation is not only the creator of the heavens and earth, but of all nations as well. This assertion is made in preparation for the following description of God as director of human history.

Having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitations. This verse was Dibelius' starting point as he argued that it, and consequently the whole speech, must be interpreted philosophically. Seasons were understood to be the four seasons of the year, and the boundaries were understood to be the inhabitable zones of the earth. Paul was arguing, he said, in true Stoic fashion, that God had provided the seasons and boundaries as evidence of his existence that would enable men to seek after him and discover him through philosophical contemplation of the universe. But it is much better to **interpret the word *kairoi* ("seasons") in accordance with its usage in the Septuagint to refer to the allotted times of the nations, and not to the seasons of the year (cf. Dan. 2:21). Paul is asserting that the God who created the heavens and the earth is also the God who directs the course of history, determining both the length of time and amount of territory to be allotted to each nation.** Far from the static, conceptual god of Stoic philosophy, the God of Paul's proclamation is the living, acting Lord of history.

That they should seek after God. Again, "seek" is not to be understood in the sense of a philosophical search, but in the well attested Septuagintal sense of seeking God in worship and obedience to his laws. Far from making a philosophical argument for the existence of God, Paul is proclaiming to the Athenians that the God of whom they are ignorant is the God who made the entire cosmos, who created man to dwell in that cosmos, and who has controlled the whole history of man that man might have an opportunity to seek and serve him.

If haply they might feel after him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. Dibelius would have us understand these clauses as an indication of the near success of the Athenians in finding God through a philosophical search. But his interpretation fails to give due notice to the optatives in the first clause and the strong concessive force of the second. The contingency of the optatives coupled with the concessive clause makes it clear that Paul is not speaking of man's success in finding God, but of his failure. In spite of God's nearness to his creation, the nations have failed to know and worship him as creator.

In him we live, and move, and have our being. Again, this is not to be construed as an expression of Stoic pantheism, with *en* in the locative sense. Rather, *en* is to be understood in the causal sense, "in the power of God." Paul's statement is grounded in the Biblical concept of God's role as sustainer and provider for his creation.

For we are his offspring. Here Paul clearly seeks common ground with his hearers. But his use of the quotation from the Greek poet Aratus is more rhetorical than substantive. While the Greeks might use this phrase to express either the cruder concepts of mythology or a pantheism such as the Stoics', Paul is certainly using it to express the Biblical concept of man's creation by God and in the image of God.

The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent. To interpret this exhortation to repentance only in the sense of an intellectual re-orientation, one must either deny the genuineness of the speech or manifest a colossal ignorance of the Jewish attitude toward idolatry. That a man who once described himself as a Pharisee and a Hebrew of Hebrews could look on the idolatry of the Athenians only as an intellectual and philosophical shortcoming is inconceivable. Idolatry was a moral offense against God. Moreover, through long conflict with the Canaanites, the Hebrews were well aware of the inevitable connection between idolatry and other forms of pagan immorality—an immorality of which the Greeks were just as exemplary as the Canaanites. To Paul, idolatry and immorality were all one and the same issue. And both were a manifestation of ignorance of the true God. His exhortation to repentance must therefore be understood, not in a sterile philosophical sense, but in its fullest moral connotation.

He hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world. Here Paul announces yet another truth to which Greek philosophy had never been able to attain—a coming judgment. **The Greeks thought their cosmos was eternal. But Paul declares, not only that it will come to an end, but that its end will come with a righteous judgment.**

Whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. Now Paul comes to the verification of his proclamation, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is on the basis of this historical fact that he tells the Athenians that they may have assurance of the truth of his preceding proclamation of the nature of the true God.

THE APOLOGETIC FORCE OF PAUL'S ADDRESS

It is only when Paul's speech is seen in this distinctly Christian perspective of the historical revelation of God, as opposed to the Stoic philosophical approach, that the real apologetic force of his message is seen. We spoke earlier of the failure of Greek philosophy to resolve certain critical questions pertaining to the nature of the universe, man's purpose in that universe, ethics, and certainty of knowledge. At that time we also noted the inability of the Greek gods to contribute to the solution of those problems. It is imperative for us to realize that the inability of Greek philosophy to provide any ultimate answers to those questions stemmed directly from the inability of Greek philosophy to arrive at a knowledge of the true God, the transcendent creator of the universe. Only a God who bore these characteristics of transcendancy and absolute creative power could provide a means of escape from the tormenting questions which Greek philosophy had raised. Moreover, it is crucial to understand that this failure of the Greeks to arrive at a knowledge of God is directly related to the fact that their approach was philosophical.⁵⁰ Philosophical systems may speculate about the potential existence and nature of Deity, but such systems can never arrive at certainty about the actual existence and nature of Deity. Man just cannot reach up to God by philosophy. He is locked into the historical world, and any knowledge of a transcendent God must come from God's breaking into that history and revealing himself to man there. And that is exactly the nature of the revelation Paul was proclaiming to the Athenians. In their wisdom they had failed to know God. They were, by their own confession, ignorant. Paul therefore proclaims to them the true creator God who revealed himself to man historically. With this knowledge of God as the transcendent creator, the door was opened to solve the problems which Greek philosophy could raise, but never answer.

The question of the nature of the universe could now be answered because a means of escape had been provided from the logical consequences of Greek materialism. Matter was not eternal after all. It had been created out of nothing by an eternal God. Hence the key to understanding the nature of the universe was not in the nature of matter, but in the nature of the Creator. This permitted an escape from both the fatalism of the Stoics and from the Epicurean conclusion that life had no ultimate purpose.

Finally, the proclamation of the apostle provides an answer to the pangs of uncertainty which Greek philosophy had produced. Certainty is to be found, says Paul, not in your philosophical speculations, but in the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, for here “he hath given assurance unto all men.”

CURRENT IMPLICATIONS OF PAUL’S APOLOGETIC APPROACH

I am persuaded that a correct understanding of Paul’s encounter with the pagan philosophy of Athens will produce benefits that extend far beyond mere exegetical precision. We of the Western world are still heirs of the very philosophical skepticism of the ancient Greeks.

When it comes our turn to give the answers, and the verification for our faith, we must plant our feet exactly where Paul planted his—in the historical revelation of God to man in the death, burial, and resurrection of his Son Jesus. This is the message we must proclaim. It is the gospel, the good news of the factual, historical act of God in Christ to reveal himself to us. In sum, our apologetic, if it is to be successful in countering the philosophical skepticism of our day, must be shifted away from the philosophical heritage of Greece, and grounded in the historical facts of the gospel.¹

¹ Roberts, P. (1977). [The Times of Ignorance: Paul at Athens](#). In Bible Faculty of the Florida College (Ed.), *Centers of Faith and Faltering* (pp. 145–162). Marion, IN: Cogdill Foundation Publications.