

Paul in Athens

Notes for 19 Aug

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Read: [Acts 17:16-34](#)



(Ashmolean, Oxford)

Background

Paul, having left Berea in something of a hurry, went to Athens. He was apparently waiting for Timothy and Silas to join him (v15).

Paul, being Paul, engaged immediately with the local synagogue and "God-fearing Gentiles", expressing his dismay at the number of idols in the city (a Roman satirist had declared that, in Athens, 'It is easier to find a god than a man').

He got into some debates with some [Epicurean](#) and [Stoic](#) philosophers. Then he was invited (not sure if this is a strong enough word?) to speak to the High Council of the city, in the Areopagus.

- Read up on the [Epicurean](#) and [Stoic](#) schools of philosophy.
- The Aeropagus was both a place and a 'council'. [Read up on it](#), to get some idea of what Paul was engaging with.

Paul then claims that he has the answer for the 'Unknown God' statue that he had seen earlier in his visit. Read the texts vv22-33.

Discussion

- What is your mental picture when you think about the Aeropagus and the various schools of philosophers, apparently wandering around, thinking and talking (v21)? I confess to thinking of [this](#) and [this](#)...
- Are we a bit sniffy about philosophers? Too much *thinking* and not enough actually *doing*? Or as my good lady wife would put it 'They need to get out and grow their own vegetables'. Discuss!
- If you had to talk to Epicureans and Stoics about the meaning of life, what would you say?
- The 'Unknown God' idol is stereotyped by many Christians as being the ultimate intellectual indulgence of the pampered and confused Greek thinker. What do you think of [this quote](#)?
Because the Jewish God could not be named, it is possible that Paul's Athenian listeners would have considered his God to be "the unknown god par excellence". His listeners may also have understood the introduction of a new god by allusions to Aeschylus' [The Eumenides](#); the irony would have been that just as the Eumenides were not new gods at all but the Furies in a new form, so was the Christian God not a new god but rather the god the Greeks already worshipped as the Unknown God. His audience would also have recognized the quotes in verse 28 as coming from [Epimenides](#) and [Aratus](#), respectively.
- The gospels are full of stories of Christ's dealing with the 'common man' (and woman). Is it easier to talk to the [plebs](#) than it is to the intellectuals? Why/why not? What has been your experience?
- Lastly - the Big Questions!
When I requested that the VV Telegram group "bring your best rationalist, scientist self to the discussion!" there were immediate (friendly!) retorts that we're not in the rationalist business.
 - Are we Christians rational beings?
 - Is a certain degree of mysticism necessary for a true Christian experience? (I use the word 'mysticism' lightly - think of it as being the quasi-opposite of 'rational'...)
 - Is talking philosophy a waste of time?
 - Is Christianity fundamentally anti-intellectual?