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these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:5, 6).

A serious warning. Let's take it to heart. Let us never be guilty of causing a fellow young Christian to feel excluded and so cause him to sin by seeking his friendships in the midst of un-

believers and those who scoff at the Word of God. For then we are baring our necks to receive a great millstone.

Let us seek our friends from among the friends of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we love the Lord Jesus Christ, we will love those whom the Lord loves. If we are a member of His body, we will want to associate with His and our fellow members.

But let us not be frightened to make friends with our pagan neighbours; however, let us do so for the right reasons. Let us not be selfish but selfless in this and establish such friendships so that we may be in a good position to speak to them about the Lord Jesus Christ, our love for Him and our service of Him.



The Apostle and the Poet: Paul and Aratus

By R. Faber

Introduction

It was A.D. 51 when the apostle Paul visited the famous Greek city of Athens. Proud of the glory that once was hers, this city could boast that she had produced some of the greatest artists, writers and thinkers. Athens was the cradle of democracy, the centre of learning, and the uncontested leader of the civilized world. It is not surprising therefore that Luke, who records Paul's visit to the city in Acts 17, makes Paul's speech to the Athenians one of the high points of his book. Here we read of the clash between Christianity and paganism, and how the gospel of Jesus Christ and the resurrection was received by people famous for their religious character. Paul presents the good news of salvation especially to the philosophers who confess that Paul brings "strange things" to their ears and who wish to know what he means. The apostle intends to refute both the serious and the popular philosophies of the Greeks, yet he does not ridicule his listeners. Paul's warning of the imminent judgment of God has as goal the conversion of his audience by reasoned yet urgent appeal. And in order to convince his listeners the apostle must know well their beliefs and how he might lead the Athenians to the realization that their tenets are false and must change. Paul tests the spirit of the Athenians and shows them that it is not of the true God.

In this article I shall consider the part of Paul's speech in which he cites a

Greek poet much admired in antiquity. In verse 28 of Acts 17 Paul quotes the *Phaenomena* of Aratus not to demonstrate his erudition but to show the Athenians that their religion is tantamount to idolatry. Paul enhances his argument by adducing an authority even the Athenians would respect. The apostle shows thereby that he is familiar with the writings and beliefs of the Greeks, and that in proving them false he is able to employ even their own authorities. Thus to some extent Paul uses the ideas and language of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers who were popular in first-century Athens. Yet he does so to refute the commonly held belief in Athens that gods should be worshipped by means of temples, statues and altars. Paul uses a line from the poem of Aratus as a part of his message that the people must repent from the idolatry which characterized their lives. Moreover, the apostle argues that the pantheism which the Stoics taught was also a misconception of the true God as He revealed Himself in His Word and through His Son. Accordingly Paul's address culminates in the good news of eternal life in the resurrected Christ.

The apostle of the Areopagus

The Areopagus was an ancient hill near the *agora* (market-place) of Athens. According to legend this "hill of Ares" was the first site for the court of justice established by the city's patron goddess, Athena. And in the early history of Athens the judicial court did meet here.

Due to the radical democracy which replaced the conservative political system of Athens in the fifth century the court lost much power, yet it remained a prestigious and venerable institution. It is probable that in the days of Paul the court of the Areopagus still tried cases of homicide and investigated matters of moral and religious nature. Some scholars think that in Acts 17 Paul actually defends himself before the city's councillors in a public trial of the apostle's teaching.¹ When Luke reports that Paul stood "in the middle of the Areopagus" he probably refers not to the place where he stood but to the institution commonly associated with the locale. Whatever the case, Paul presents his address in the presence of Athenians, including Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, and foreigners who chanced to be present.

When he begins to speak, Paul captures the goodwill of his listeners with what appears to be a compliment: "I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (22). No doubt as he had walked through the *agora* to the Areopagus, Paul had observed the numerous temples, images and altars erected there. It soon becomes evident, however, that Paul deems the religious fervour of the citizens to be misplaced. Though they worship many gods, the Athenians do not worship the true God. And the apostle uses the inscription "to the unknown god" on one altar to introduce to the Athenians the God whom he professes. He whom the

Athenians worship as unknown is the God whom Paul makes known to them. The "times of ignorance" as Paul later says, have passed; now the Athenians must worship the one and only God, and Him in the proper manner.

Idolatry is one pagan practice of the Athenians which the missionary attacks. Paul may have spoken at some length about God's second commandment not to worship Him by means of images. It is remarkable that the apostle focuses on this religious practice of the Athenians. For hereby he touches the heart of an important issue in Greek religious life in the first century. From archaic to classical times the worship of the Olympian gods was real and meaningful, whereas in Paul's day scepticism and a faith in pantheism had undermined the traditional Greek religion and had thrown into question the belief that gods were anthropomorphic and ought to be worshipped as such. Such novel ideas, advanced especially by Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, are employed by Paul to lead the Athenians to the realization that they are an idolatrous people.

The Stoic philosophers, mentioned in verse 18 as one party with whom Paul discourses, taught that Zeus is not a god in the form of a human being but a force which permeates all animate and inanimate things. This guiding principle, which unites all living things into one cosmos, they called Reason (Logos). Zeus, the Stoics believed, was not an immortal being, but a power without person. Accordingly Paul could be confident that these philosophers would concur with his statement that "God does not live in shrines made by man" (24). Paul tells the Athenians that God does not live in a dwelling as humans do, and that He cannot be represented in the form of man. The terminology which Paul employs in this verse is similar to that used by the Stoics, yet one should not conclude that Paul is preaching a purely Stoic philosophy.² One need only glance at Isaiah 42:5 and Exodus 20:11 to see that Paul's depiction of God the Creator is thoroughly biblical. He merely uses the same language that the Stoics use in their description of the Zeus they believe controls the universe. The Stoics were correct in decrying the numerous temples, altars and statues in Athens. To support his position Paul quotes an authority the Athenian thinkers must have known: the Hellenistic poet Aratus.³ Paul alludes to Aratus to convince his

audience that God cannot be represented "by the art and imagination of man" (17:29).

The poet Aratus and the *Phaenomena*

Although antiquity deemed Aratus one of the greatest Hellenistic poets, very little information about him survives today. We do know that he lived in the late fourth and early third centuries before Christ, that his place of birth was probably Soli in Paul's native province of Cilicia, and that he studied Stoic philosophy in Athens at the school founded by Zeno (c. 340-265 B.C.). Aratus evidently spent much time in the circle of writers and artists who enjoyed the patronage of the Macedonian king Antigonos Gonatas. Aratus' literary output included an edition of Homer's *Odyssey*, hymns, epigrams, and even didactic poems on pharmacology and astronomy. Unfortunately, the only work which survives in its entirety is a poem entitled *Phaenomena* (literally, "natural appearances"). Fortunately for our study of Paul's speech on the Areopagus, it is this poem which the apostle quotes; we can thus read for ourselves the context of the half-line quoted in Acts 17:28: "For we are indeed his offspring."

The *Phaenomena* is a peculiar poem: it attempts to put into verse two fourth century prose works on the stars and on the weather. An astronomer named Eudoxus had written a treatise on constellations, while another writer, reportedly one Theophrastus, had composed a handbook about the signs of the weather. Following an 18-line introduction in which he states the purpose of his poem and praises Zeus for his kindness in giving to mankind natural signs by which to conduct his business, Aratus dedicates one section (19-757) to a poetic discussion of the constellations, and a second (758-1154) to the use of weather patterns. At first glance the poem appears to be little more than a "farmers' almanac," a guide for learning the significance of changing seasons and weather systems. A long tradition of writing such didactic poems had started with the eighth century poet Hesiod, who also composed a work on the constellations called *Astronomia*. For subject and style the author of the *Phaenomena* was inspired by the works of Hesiod and those of the other ancient epic poet, Homer.

It appears that one of Aratus' aims in writing this poem was to demonstrate his skill in providing detailed scientific



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information by means of non-technical, poetic language. Like other Hellenistic poets, Aratus wanted to infuse new life into ancient genres. His contribution was to rejuvenate the genre of didactic poetry by using the most modern and advanced scientific documents. Aratus succeeded in adapting a difficult technical prose work to poetry. And the popularity which this poem enjoyed in antiquity attests to Aratus' success. The contemporary poet Callimachus praised the poem as an elegant and refined piece of work, and it appears that many readers appreciated Aratus' polished and precise style. Not only did Greeks like the poem, educated Latin writers did too. The famous Roman orator and statesman Cicero translated the poem into Latin, while Vergil was inspired by the *Phaenomena* when he wrote the *Georgics*, also an ostensibly didactic poem, about farming. We may assume, therefore, that the *Phaenomena* was read widely by educated people in the days of Paul.

Since Aratus was schooled in Stoic philosophy, it is not surprising that Stoic doctrine appears in the *Phaenomena*. Especially in the opening section of the poem (lines 1-18), in which Aratus writes of the omnipotent and omnipresent power of Zeus, Stoic philosophy and language abounds. The half-line “for we are indeed his offspring” is found in this section of the poem. To see the phrase in its context, consider the following translation of lines 1-5 of the *Phaenomena*:

Let us begin with Zeus, whom we mortals never leave unspoken.

For every street, every market-place is full of Zeus.

Even the sea and the harbour are full of this deity. Everywhere everyone is indebted to Zeus. For we are indeed his offspring... (*Phaenomena* 1-5).

It is noteworthy that Aratus commences his poem with the words, “let us begin with Zeus,” for the gods who were conventionally invoked by Greek poets were the Muses, the goddesses of poetic inspiration. Aratus’ contemporaries would have been struck by this change, by which the poet lends a religious Stoic tenor into the *Phaenomena*. To ancient Greeks Zeus was the sky-god whose control over the sun and clouds directly concerned human beings; mention of him at the outset of a work on constellations and weather is therefore appropriate. For Hellenistic Stoics, however, Zeus was another name for that force which controlled the universe and resided in man and beast. It is a kind of pantheism which Aratus advances in these opening lines: the divine Reason permeates every facet of human endeavour. The city-streets and market-places, the seas and harbours are filled with the presence of this deity (lines 2-3). Zeus must be praised at the start of his poem because this “world-soul” controls the cosmos. Mankind is, according to such belief, part of that environment and so “is indebted to Zeus.” The omnipotence of Zeus is expressed with the words “for we are indeed his offspring.” Literally the poet states that we are of the race (*genos*) of Zeus. Thus the ancient weather-god, once depicted in anthropomorphic terms, is replaced by the Stoics with an abstract force which pervades the entire world. Having noted the context of the half-verse “for we are indeed his offspring,” the reader will conclude that the apostle Paul does not quote this passage in complete agreement with its

meaning and intent, but in order to show that even to some Greek thinkers and writers the idea of an anthropomorphic Zeus is false.

The quotation in the context of Paul’s speech

Verses 24-31 of chapter 17 clarify Paul’s use of the quotation in declaring the gospel of repentance to the Athenians. When he cites the saying that man is God’s offspring, Paul employs the words in light of God’s self-revelation in the Old Testament. Mankind was created in the image and likeness of God, as revealed in Genesis 1:26-27. Paul does not give the phrase “for we are indeed His offspring” the meaning which Stoics do; rather, he uses it to preach that God abhors idolatrous worship. Paul had stated earlier in his speech that God does not “live in shrines made by man” (24). After quoting Aratus the apostle says that the Deity is not “like gold, or silver, or stone” (25). Surely Paul has in mind the second commandment here, as stated, for example, in Leviticus 26:1: “you shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no graven image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land.” The Stoics had rightly reasoned that if mankind is the offspring of God, then the living God cannot be represented by an inanimate object. Paul himself writes elsewhere that God’s eternal power and deity are visible in creation (Romans 1:20). And in yet another context the apostle restates in general terms what he says specifically to the Athenian populace in Acts 17: “What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and move among them’ (2 Corinthians 6:16).” Thus on the Areopagus Paul points out that the Athenians had exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man.

Verses 24-31 also makes clear that Paul does not adopt the Stoic theology of a guiding principle as expressed by Aratus; the apostle depicts God as the Creator, whose person is real. In verse 25 the missionary reminds his listeners that God is the creator of the universe, who has no need of human idolatrous adoration. Here Paul may have in mind Psalm 50:7-15, where the Lord states that He does not require sacrifices from mortals, for all the world and everything in it is His by virtue of His work of creation. And to underscore the personal

quality of the true God Paul states that God has “overlooked” the times of ignorance (30), “commands” all men to repent (31), since He has fixed a day when He “will judge” (31) the world by Christ whom He “has appointed” (31). Thus the apostle in no way identifies with Stoic or Epicurean theology, but declares the God who is Creator and Judge.

In light of this history of redemption Paul also proclaims Jesus Christ and the resurrection. The salvation of the idolatrous Athenians lies in the faith in the risen Christ. Not only does Paul show the error in both popular Greek religion and serious philosophy, but also he urges the people that “they should seek God.” In verse 30 Paul states that whereas the Athenians’ worship of an unknown god was overlooked by God in former times, now that the true God has been proclaimed to them the citizens must repent. Judgment of the world is imminent. God has given assurance of this coming event by raising Jesus Christ from the dead. Indeed Jesus and the resurrection are the main themes of Paul’s speech. With sorrow we note that this gospel was mocked by some: the gospel is folly to the Gentiles. Yet the mission work in Athens was not altogether futile, for some believed, including Dionysius and Damaris. As for the Athenian philosophers, they could no longer claim that the message of salvation had not been told to them.

¹For the debate regarding formal trial or unofficial address see T.D. Barnes, “An Apostle on Trial,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 20, 1969, 407-419; C.J. Hemer, “The Speeches of Acts,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 40, 1989, 239-259.

²M. Dibelius, “Paul on the Areopagus,” in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (London, 1956), 63, argues that the speech is “alien to the New Testament” and thoroughly Stoic in sentiment and language. More attractive is the interpretation that the speech is in part a *praeparatio evangelica* intended to guide Paul’s listeners from their own position to his “strange” (20) one.

³When Paul says “as even some of your poets have said” (28) he reveals his learning, for the sentiment that mankind is the offspring of Zeus was expressed also by Cleanthes, another Hellenistic poet, in his *Hymn to Zeus*, line 4. The half-line quoted, however, comes from Aratus’ poem. Recently M.J. Edwards, “Quoting Aratus,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 83, 1992, 266-269, plausibly argued that Paul’s direct source was Aristobolus, a second century B.C. Jew who cites the opening lines of the *Phaenomena*. 