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The Importance of Studying Scripture in its Cultural Context; a Western Perspective: Acts 17:16-34

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In western culture, specifically in the United States of America, it is common for people to interpret the biblical texts based on their own cultural experiences rather than through the culture from which the Scriptures were written. Studying the Bible in this way can lead to a misunderstanding of biblical context and a misapplication of biblical principles. When studied in the proper cultural context, the misinterpretation and misapplication of Scripture is significantly reduced, allowing the reader to better understand how a given passage applies to his or her circumstances.

Luke's account of the Apostle Paul's speech in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) provides an excellent example of the importance of studying Scripture within its cultural context. Before looking at the biblical text itself it is important to look at the cultural nuances surrounding the passage. This approach will provide a sound backdrop for a subsequent exegesis of the text.

Luke, the author of the gospel by the same name, is also the author of the book of Acts. According to Steve Ger, at the most basic level Luke wrote Acts as a book of early church history.¹ This is the context in which Luke documents Paul's speech in Athens. He shows the efforts Paul takes to spread the Gospel throughout the known world. This account takes place during Paul's second missionary journey, between A.D. 50 and A.D. 53.² During his journeys, Paul would first attempt to preach the Gospel to Jews but would eventually switch to a Gentile audience.³ In Athens, he followed the same basic pattern.

Athens is the capital of modern-day Greece. It was established in the 6th century B.C. and has played a prominent role in history. Initially, it was full of brilliant architecture and attracted intellectuals from all over Greece. It was known as a place to study philosophy, rhetoric, and science.⁴

The city had changed somewhat by the 1st century A.D. Athens had long since lost its political renown, but it was still revered for its culture and philosophical prowess.⁵ It was a city full of masterpieces of architecture and sculptures made as temples and images of pagan gods to be worshiped.⁶ Robert Dunham adds, "...it still afforded its visitors and tourists quite an impressive array of Hellenistic treasures - art, poetry, drama, and lively philosophical and religious conversation."⁷ If there was anywhere in the world that could challenge the intellectual acuity of Paul's gospel message, it was Athens.

¹ Steven Ger, Mal Couch, and Edward E. Hindson, *The Book of Acts: Witnesses to the World*, Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series (Chattanooga, Tenn.: AMG Publishers, 2004), 1.

² Henry Hampton Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook with the New International Version*, completely rev. and expanded. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 743.

³ Acts 13:46, 14:1, 17:2, 17:10, 17:17, 18:5-6, 19:8-9, 28:17 & 28. The Holy Bible. English Standard Version. Unless others noted all Scripture references will be from the English Standard Version.

⁴ *Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Athens."

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 329.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Robert Dunham, "Between Text & Sermon: Acts 17:16-34: A Journal of Bible and Theology," *Interpretation* 60, no. 2 (2006): 202, accessed July 9, 2019. <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/>.

Equally as important as the location was the people who could be found there. As mentioned above, Athens was a hub for religious and philosophical conversation. Two of the groups specifically mentioned as conversing with Paul in Athens were the Epicureans and the Stoics (Acts 17:18).

Epicureans were a philosophical group that followed the teachings of Epicurus. According to Walter Elwell, “Epicurus (341-270 b.c.) established a school in ancient Athens that became famous for its teachings on ethics in the Hellenistic world.”⁸ Steve Ger adds, Epicureans believed “the pursuit of pleasure was humanity’s highest goal.”⁹ This pursuit of pleasure was different than what comes to mind when this phrase is uttered in modern times. Richard Jungkuntz explains, Epicureans believed “the ideal state of happiness and blessedness may most readily be attained by avoiding involvement in the anxieties that normally go with riches, office, or power.”¹⁰ In other words the goal was to live a life unnoticed. Another of their beliefs that will prove significant for Paul’s speech, is the belief that there are no supernatural beings to fear or obey, life exists only in the physical body.¹¹ These beliefs will prove challenging for Paul’s Gospel message.

The Stoics did not derive their name from the founder of their philosophical movement. They were founded by Zeno of Citium and took their name from the painted porch (stoa) in Athens where their founder used to teach.¹² According to Joseph Pathrapankal, “the Stoics believed that the human race was one, proceeding from a single point of origin, that there was a divine being, and that the duty of humans was to live in accordance with this indwelling god.”¹³ Essentially, they believed in a form of pantheism – god is in everything.¹⁴ Steve Ger adds, Stoics believed “because all destiny is dictated by fate, the goal was to achieve a deportment of apathy toward pain, pleasure, suffering or health, peacefully accepting whatever lot befell one.”¹⁵ This lifestyle came from their belief that god inhabited everything, therefore, whatever happened to them in life should be viewed as destiny. Stoic beliefs will likewise be challenging for the Gospel.

⁸ S.R. Obitts, “Epicureanism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 382.

⁹ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 236.

¹⁰ Richard Jungkuntz, “Christian Approval of Epicureanism.” *Church History* 31, no. 3 (1962): 284, accessed July 8, 2019. <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/>

¹¹ Obitts, *Epicureanism*, 382.

¹² G.T. Burke, “Stoics, Stoicism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 1152.

¹³ Joseph Pathrapankal, “From Areopagus to Corinth (Acts 17:22-31; I Cor 2:1-5): A Study on the Transition from the Power of Knowledge to the Power of the Spirit.” *Mission Studies* 23, no. 1 (2006): 66, accessed July 9, 2019. <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/>.

¹⁴ Burke, *Stoicism*, 1152.

¹⁵ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 236.

Paul's speech in Athens would need to be different than his other Gospel presentations. The city was known for its culture and religiosity, and as a place of higher learning. This was a much different crowd than the commoners Paul was used to preaching in front of. As Beverly Gaventa points out, they were two of the most prominent schools of philosophy in the first century.¹⁶

Luke begins Acts 17:16-34 with an introduction (Acts 17:16-21). He establishes the location and the need for Paul's witness in Athens. Luke writes, "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). The word for provoked here is *paroxynō*.¹⁷ It is only used one other time in the New Testament during Paul's discourse on love (1 Cor. 13:15). In that context the English Standard Version interprets it as meaning love is not irritable or resentful. Therefore, as a description of Paul's reaction at the sight of seeing the many idols to false gods in Athens, it stirs up a sense of displeasure and discomfort inside of him.

According to Luke, in verse 17, the sight of idols stirred up such intense feelings inside of Paul he could not wait until others showed up to help him. He had to immediately begin teaching. He began with the Jews in the synagogue (as was his custom), and then went to the marketplace every day to speak with whoever would listen (Acts 17:17). The marketplace Luke refers to is commonly known as the *agora*.¹⁸ Pathrapankal describes it as the location of the 'painted stoa,' where Athenians met for philosophical discourse, and the 'royal stoa,' where the Council of the Areopagus met.¹⁹ It was the location where Paul encountered the Epicureans and the Stoics.

As Luke moves into verse 18, Joshua Jipp notes a similarity between the way Luke portrays Paul and the Greek Philosopher Socrates. He writes, "not unlike Luke's depiction of Paul as 'reasoning' (διελέγετο, v. 17a) with those in the agora, Socrates' favorite weapon was his dialectical technique of *elenchus*."²⁰ Jipp goes on to explain that among other similarities, both Paul and Socrates were charged with introducing foreign deities to Athens (Acts 17:18).²¹ It is possible that by likening Paul to Socrates, Luke is preparing the reader for the literary style Paul will use to present his argument against the philosophical views of the Epicureans and Stoics.

In verse 18, Luke continues to provide insight into the initial reception of Paul's message. He records two statements presented by Paul's audience; "what does this babblers wish to say?" and, "he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities" (Acts 17:18). The Greek word for

¹⁶ Beverly Gaventa. "Traditions in Conversation and Collision: Reflections on Multiculturalism in the Acts of the Apostles." In *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed. by Brian K. Blount, and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000), 32.

¹⁷ Strong's Greek Hebrew Dictionary, "G3947."

¹⁸ Strong's Greek Hebrew Dictionary, "G58."

¹⁹ Pathrapankal, *From Areopagus to Corinth*, 65.

²⁰ Joshua Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16-34 as both Critique and Propaganda." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 3 (2012): 570-71, accessed July 8, 2019, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/>.

²¹ *Ibid*, 571.

babbler here is *spermologos*; a gossip or one who talks with little importance.²² Pathrapankal believes the audience was accusing Paul of “picking up second hand opinions.”²³ Ger believes the audience felt Paul had nothing important to offer.²⁴ Regardless which of these views one ascribes to, it is clear the audience did not believe Paul could provide them with an intelligent conversation.

The other part of the audience, who accused Paul of preaching foreign gods believed Paul was at risk of violating Athenian law. Ger writes, “According to Roman (and Athenian) law, the introduction of new religions was prohibited. In fact, it was this very accusation that had resulted in the death of Socrates...”²⁵ Jipp adds,

To read Acts 17:17–20, therefore, as though it were an innocuous philosophical discussion between the Athenians and Paul is to misread the narrative and the evidence regarding the introduction of new gods into Greek cities. The evidence points, rather, in the direction of a conflict, more specifically in the direction of the Athenians putting Paul on trial.²⁶

This was no light-hearted conversation in the marketplace. Paul potentially faced death for the statements he was making.

Nevertheless, as the following three verses indicate, Paul had piqued the curiosity of the Athenians (Acts 17:19-21). He was brought to the Areopagus (vs. 19), to tell the Athenians more about what he was saying (vs. 20). Ger notes that the “chief judicial body of Athens” would have also been present at the Areopagus.²⁷ Paul was not only speaking with the philosophers but also with those in charge of city politics. These were the people capable of instituting a death sentence.

Paul’s speech begins in verse 22. According to Luke’s record of the event Paul begins by saying, “men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-23). The Greek word for very religious here is *deisidaimonesteros*, and means more religious than others or very superstitious.²⁸ Ger makes an important observation. He writes, “Paul was deliberately ambiguous in his word choice, neither overtly expressing his repulsion for their idolatry nor falsely complementing it”²⁹ He goes on to point out that, “the same word that is

²² Strong’s Greek Hebrew Dictionary, “G4691.”

²³ Pathrapankal, *From Areopagus to Corinth*, 66.

²⁴ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 236.

²⁵ Ibid, 236-237.

²⁶ Jipp, *Paul’s Areopagus Speech*, 573.

²⁷ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 237.

²⁸ Strong’s Greek Hebrew Dictionary, “G1174.”

²⁹ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 237.

translated ‘religious’ is understood by Jews as meaning, ‘fear of the demonic.’”³⁰ Paul captured the attention of his Athenian audience by appealing to their prideful religiosity, while at the same time making a veiled mockery of it.

Paul reinforces his point by mentioning the Athenian altars inscribed to an unknown god (Acts 17:23). Jipp explains, “the motivation for establishing altars to unknown gods arises out of a fear that one has not placated every god possible.”³¹ The irony of this practice, as Paul shows, is that in doing so the Athenians have overlooked the one true God. Pathrapankal seems to agree when he writes, “in this way Paul tries to get his audience on his side, suggesting that the God whom he preaches is not a new divinity but the one whom the Athenians have been unknowingly worshiping all along (17:22-23).”³² Paul’s argument in verses 22 and 23 shows that he is trying to appeal to Athenian reason. If he can get them to agree that he is not talking about a god outside the scope of Athenian worship, they will be much more inclined to follow the rest of what he has to say.

An interesting parallel exists between verse 24, “the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man” (Acts 17:24); and Acts 7:48, “yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands” (Acts 7:48). This statement is part of the very argument Stephen used before being stoned at the hands of Paul. It should be noted that at the time Stephen made this argument, he was similarly on trial except in front of the Jewish elite to include Paul who was then called Saul (Acts 7:58). At the time Paul, like the Athenians, was acting on a mistaken view of God, while Stephen was trying to share the Gospel. The parallelism is striking but could be the subject of an entire paper so it will not be dwelled upon any further here.

In both speeches, it is certain the orator had Isaiah 66:1-2 in mind. However, unlike Stephen’s speech, Paul did not make it obvious he was quoting from the Old Testament. Instead, he formatted his argument in the prose of the philosophers. Ger explains, “it [Acts 17:24] remarkably represents the thoughts of the renowned classical Greek playwright, Euripides...”³³ This was a source Paul’s audience would certainly have been familiar with and most likely agreed with. F.F. Bruce adds, “before a pagan audience he [Paul] naturally does not make his points by formally quoting from the OT, as he did in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, but if he instead introduces quotations from Greek poets, he does not adopt those poets’ perspective; rather, he interprets their words in a biblical sense.”³⁴ Paul’s point was clear. God is too great to be contained in temples made by man (Acts 17:24).

In verse 25, Paul masterfully incorporates ideas familiar to both Epicureans and Stoics. He argues that God is in need of nothing from mankind, but on the contrary provides all things to mankind (Acts 17:25). Bruce comments, “here may be discerned approximations to the Epicurean doctrine that God needs nothing from human beings and to the Stoic belief that he is

³⁰ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 237.

³¹ Jipp, *Paul’s Areopagus Speech*, 578.

³² Pathrapankal, *From Areopagus to Corinth*, 67.

³³ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 238.

³⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 382.

the source of all life (see on v. 28).³⁵ The similarities to the respective philosophical doctrines would have most assuredly kept the philosophers invested in Paul's speech.

It is at this point that Paul begins to diverge from mutual assertions to biblical principles. He introduces the philosophers to the history of mankind as it is written in Genesis (Acts 17:26). Paul speaks of all mankind originating through one man (Gen. 1:27-28). While this is similar to the Stoic assertion that "the human race was one, proceeding from a single point of origin...and that the duty of humans was to live in accordance with this indwelling god;"³⁶ it would have been viewed as contrary to the Athenian view that Athenians were unique and rose up directly from the ground of Athens.³⁷ Paul was transitioning into the "new philosophy" his audience was waiting to hear as he prepared them for the truth of the Gospel.

Verse 28 takes the reader back to the concept Luke records in verse 25, God provides all things to mankind. In this verse, Paul uses two quotes which his audience would have recognized. "In him we live and move and have our being," and, "For we are indeed his offspring" (Acts 17:38). Ger explains, the first quote is from a Stoic named Epimenides circa 500 BC, and the second quote is from a Stoic named Aratus circa 250 BC.³⁸ Paul was showing how early Stoic philosophy was not far from the truth he was presenting. Bruce takes this point further when he writes, "By presenting God as creator and judge, Paul emphasizes his personal character as opposed to the pantheistic Zeus of the Stoics."³⁹ While the Stoic quotes were similar to the arguments Paul was making, the Stoic's portrayal of god was impersonal, whereas Paul was speaking of the personal nature of God.

Paul then uses the Stoic poet's own statement (Acts 17:28), as an argument against the idols the Athenians are so partial to (Acts 17:29). Jipp writes, "He [Paul] has advanced his claims that God is near humanity (17:27-28) and has prepared for his anti-idol polemic (17:29) by invoking the Greek poets that resonate with Septuagintal teaching on God."⁴⁰ Verse 29 concludes Paul's explanation of God's personal nature with an attack on idol worship. He uses the personal nature of God to argue idol worship is a foolish and useless practice because mankind's true relationship with God is far more intimate than with a statue.

In verses 30 and 31 Paul's speech concludes with a call to repentance from impending judgment. Luke writes, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). The Greek word for overlooked here is *hypereidon* and means "not punish."⁴¹ Bruce points out that Paul is not advocating the idea that God did not

³⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 382.

³⁶ Pathrapankal, *From Areopagus to Corinth*, 66.

³⁷ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 238.

³⁸ Ibid, 239.

³⁹ Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 385.

⁴⁰ Jipp, *Paul's Areopagus Speech*, 585.

⁴¹ Strong's Greek Hebrew Dictionary, "G5237."

punish people for their sins until now.⁴² Ger adds, “The certain guarantee that the future day of reckoning has been firmly set is the Messiah’s resurrection.”⁴³ Paul is explaining that Christ’s resurrection brought about the time leading up to the final judgement.

Furthermore, verse 31 points back to verse 18, where the Athenians accused Paul of introducing two new gods – *Iēsous* (Jesus) and *Anastasis* (Resurrection). Luke has presented Christ as the bookends of Paul’s entire speech. Bruce explains that Paul’s speech almost entirely consists of preparation work leading up to this verse.⁴⁴ Just as Christ is the culmination of the Gospel message, so to is he the culmination of Paul’s speech at the Areopagus. The only difference is that Paul could not use Scripture to get the Athenians to this point. He had to relate it to things they understood.

The response to Paul’s speech was divided. “Some mocked,” but some wanted to hear more (Acts 17:32). Pathrapankal explains, “This is not surprising for Athenians had been taught that there was no resurrection.”⁴⁵ What is surprising is that some did indeed accept Paul’s message and became believers (Acts 17:34). Ger mentions that some believe Paul’s speech was a failure because of the small number of conversions.⁴⁶ Statistically this may be true, but salvifically it is far from a failure. Jipp adds, “Paul’s discourse should be viewed not as an atypical account of the gospel’s failure, but rather as an example showing that the Christian movement gains converts even in pagan Athens.”⁴⁷ Even one person entering into salvation is a resounding success.

The original meaning of Paul’s speech is simple. For the Athenians, Paul put the Gospel message in terms they could understand. There is one God and he is the creator of all things (Acts 17:24-25). He is a God of personal relationships (Acts 17:26-28). He demands repentance from evil (Acts 17:30). He sent Christ through whom he will judge the world, and the proof is Christ’s resurrection from the dead (Acts 17:31).

The meaning of this speech within Luke’s account of early church history is slightly different. Pathrapankal notes Paul’s speech in Acts 17:16-34 sets out to show evidence of Luke’s “theological position” in Acts 12:24, “the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents.”⁴⁸ Luke is showing the movement and growth of the church through Paul’s second missionary journey. Although the number of conversions was relatively small, Christianity still continued to advance.

Acts 17:16-34 has been explored in its original cultural context, the problems of studying it in a modern American context can now be explored. The United States has been one of the most religiously tolerant countries for many years. For this reason, it is difficult for Americans to

⁴² Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 385.

⁴³ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 239.

⁴⁴ Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 387.

⁴⁵ Pathrapankal, *From Areopagus to Corinth*, 67.

⁴⁶ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 240.

⁴⁷ Jipp, *Paul’s Areopagus Speech*, 588.

⁴⁸ Pathrapankal, *From Areopagus to Corinth*, 68.

understand the risks Paul took when speaking in Athens. Socrates was killed in Athens for a similar message.⁴⁹ Christians in America may have a hard time grasping the immediacy of this threat to Paul's life unless they have traveled to a part of the world where these types of persecutions still happen.

Reading Acts 17:16-34 in an American cultural context without studying the original context it was written in will likely not result in any major misinterpretations of biblical doctrine. Although this is not the case for all Scripture. There is one significant principle that can be extracted from this passage that would certainly be missed. It comes from one of Paul's epistles. He writes, "...I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). One cannot help but wonder if Paul had experiences like the one in Athens in mind when he wrote those words.

Paul was not a Greek philosopher. Although he was a Hellenistic Jew. Paul's primary training was in the Scriptures. His customs were inherently Jewish. However, he adapted his words and strategies to liken those of the philosophers in Athens in an attempt to help them better understand the message he was presenting. Beverly Gaventa writes, "What Paul's sermon does, then, is to take basic presuppositions of Christian teaching and recast them in language available to the audience."⁵⁰ Paul adapted his message to his audience. Without understanding the culture of the Athenians, Epicureans, and Stoics, the modern American would likely miss this object lesson.

This is a principle that is important to believers in any part of the world. It is especially important in a modern American context. As Dunham explains, "too often in our time, public expressions of Christianity seem born of a deep intolerance, bolstered by an unwillingness even to engage other faiths (or their surrogates) or to take them seriously."⁵¹ He goes on to point out Paul's speech was steeped in the "language of respect."⁵² This is a principle that might be missed when Acts 17:16-34 is not studied in the right context. It is a principle that believers in the American church need to hear. The American church as of late is constantly being called intolerant, and whether this is true or not, Paul's speech provides American's a template how to engage in tolerant conversation.

In conclusion, it is necessary to study Scripture in its original cultural context. Scripture is filled with rich doctrinal truths that are still applicable today in a modern context. However, it is impossible to fully grasp Scriptures modern application without first knowing its original context.

For example, in recent years American society has embraced a pluralistic mindset. It is not uncommon for a friend or co-worker to suggest there is more than one route to God. Anything to the contrary is considered intolerant. Adopting Paul's method in Acts 17:16-34, a tolerant conversation can be had by appealing to reason rather than religion. Instead of starting with a proclamation that God alone is God and salvation only comes through Jesus, the believer should begin by highlighting the more inclusive aspects of the Gospel message. Paul's Epistle to the Romans comes to mind. He writes,

⁴⁹ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 236-237.

⁵⁰ Gaventa, *Traditions in Conversation and Collision*, 33.

⁵¹ Dunham, *Between Text & Sermon*, 204.

⁵² Ibid.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Romans 12:15-18).

By starting in this way, the believer stands a much better chance of winning the ear of his or her audience. Surely everyone can agree that it is good not to repay evil with evil (Rom. 12:17) or to “live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). Once common ground has been established and a dialogue has begun, then the believer can transition into the life lived in the Spirit (Rom. 8:6), and finally salvation through Christ alone (Rom. 10:9). Of course, this does not mean every conversation will end in salvation. That was not the case for Paul either. However, studying Acts 17:16-34 in its original context offers the modern believer a much better way to have these tough conversations in modern western culture.

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