

## Mars Hill Ἄρειος Πάγος



We interrupt our series of lessons on the Five *Solae* to look at Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Acts 17 as this relates to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers we have looked at in the previous Classical Thought lesson.

*Quidam autem ex Epicureis et Stoicis philosophis conflictabantur cum eo: et quidam dicebant, Quid vult garrulus iste dicere?* Acts 17:18. Beza's translation.

You should recognise *Epicureis et Stoicis philosophis; conflictabantur* is guessable. What about *garrulus*?

Read the whole story in Acts chapter 17 vv16-24.

The “Areopagus” was an ancient hill near the agora (market-place or *forum*) of Athens. This hill of Ares or Mars was the original site for the court of justice established, according to legend, by the city's patron goddess, Athena. And in the early history of Athens the judicial court did meet here. However, there were changes in the political system in Athens and the court had lost much of its by the time Paul visited Athens in AD 51. Nevertheless it continued as a much respected institution and it may have still tried murder cases as well as investigating moral and religious matters. Certainly it was the latter that Paul wanted to discuss and some have wondered if what we have in Acts 17 is a report of a kind of sitting of the court with Paul's “new ideas” under scrutiny. At any rate the philosophers, ever eager to hear some new teaching or idea, wanted to know what he meant. Paul set out to refute the philosophies of the Greeks but he was polite and he did not make fun of them. He had a good understanding of the philosophies they believed and he used it to present a reasoned yet urgent appeal. The Athenians needed to realize that their philosophies were false and would not lead them to the true God.

Paul quotes to his listeners from a poem that was well known in the Greek and Roman world at the time both in the original Greek and in a Latin translation. The poet is the stoic Aratus ( Ἄρατος) (c. 315 BC/310 BC – 240 BC) and the poem is his *Phaenomena*<sup>1</sup> (*φαινόμενα*), a poem which, after the

<sup>1</sup> A similar line is found in a poem by Cleanthes of Assos. See Last week's Classical Thought lesson. Aratus' poem seems to have been more well known, however, and as he was from Cilicia where Paul's home town of Tarsus was so it seems more likely that it was Aratus he was quoting.

introduction in which the quotation is found, goes on to use the medium of a poem to give teaching about the sky such as weather lore, and astronomy that would be useful to sailors or farmers.

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).

“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.”<sup>2</sup>

In the Greece of ancient times the idolatry that Paul notices he walks around Athens was driven by real belief in a pantheon of anthropomorphic<sup>3</sup> gods. By the time Paul came to the city, however, different ideas held sway, at least among the educated classes. The stoics identified Zeus, not as a capricious king of the gods on Mount Olympus but as the Logos, Reason or guiding force behind the universe. They would agree with Paul that “God dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.” However, after some initial agreement, the stoics in the audience would quickly realize that the God about whom Paul was speaking was not the pantheistic force which they considered ruled the universe. They must have been rather shocked when a discourse that began so promisingly “degenerated” into talk of a coming judgement and (even more ridiculous in their eyes) someone being raised from the dead. Epicureans in the audience would have found this particularly disagreeable. Their philosophy taught that “death was nothing to worry about” because there was no after life and certainly no judgement to come.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://spindleworks.com/library/rfaber/aratus.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Like humans in character.

