

Title: Acts 17: Berea and Athens

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Session 18

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Abstract

This lecture explores Paul's missionary journey through Berea and Athens as recorded in Acts 17, highlighting the different cultural responses he encountered. Dr. Craig Keener explains how the Bereans' nobility is characterized by their diligent study of scripture, while Paul's encounter with Athenian philosophers presents a profound study in cross-cultural apologetics and contextualization. The lecture details Paul's interactions with Epicurean and Stoic thinkers, his sermon at the Areopagus regarding the 'unknown god,' and his eventual defense of bodily resurrection. Ultimately, Keener demonstrates that while some mocked Paul, his strategic communication resulted in key converts among the Athenian intellectual elite.

Outline

I. Introduction to Acts 17 (Lecture 18)

- A. Recapitulation of Paul's departure from Thessalonica and travel along the Via Egnatia.
- B. Shift southward to Greece (Achaia) and the city of Berea.

II. The Berean Ministry (Acts 17:10-15)

- A. Character of the Bereans: Noble reception of the gospel, checking Paul's teaching against the scriptures (Torah and prophetic scrolls).
- B. Prominent involvement of wealthy or high-class women (matching Luke's themes).
- C. Thessalonian Jewish opposition arrives to stir up mobs despite lacking local legal jurisdiction.
- D. Paul's safety escape southward to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy behind.

III. Paul's Arrival in Athens and the Problem of Idolatry (Acts 17:16)

- A. Athens as a "free city" geographically but technically outside the province of Achaia.
- B. Paul's spirit stirred or distressed by the dense presence of idols, temples, and statues (corroborated by the Greek geographer Pausanias).

C. Contrast between pagan pride in Athens' intellectual reputation and Jewish critique of inanimate idolatry.

IV. Athenian Philosophers and Schools of Thought (Acts 17:18)

A. Transition of Roman-era philosophy toward ethics and behavior rather than mere ritual.

B. Epicurean Philosophy:

1. Cosmological deism: gods exist but are uninvolved in human affairs.
2. Aim of life as "pleasure," defined as the absence of bodily pain and soul trouble (peace/tranquility).
3. Rejection of the afterlife and eternal judgment.

C. Stoic Philosophy:

1. Popular pantheistic/monotheistic cosmology of Logos (Reason/Fate) acting on Physis (Nature).
2. Belief in divine design, Providence, and a cyclical universe resolved by primeval fire.
3. Ethic of virtue over pleasure, and rigid household codes.
4. High overlap with Jewish and Christian natural theology (similar to Romans 1).

D. The Accusation of being a Spermalagos:

1. Literally a marketplace bird pecking up scraps of grain; figuratively a "worthless person" or "babbler" who quotes odds and ends without deep knowledge.
2. Accusation of preaching "foreign gods" due to mistaking Anastasis (Resurrection) for a female deity paired with Jesus.

V. The Areopagus Defense (Acts 17:19-31)

A. The Areopagus as the high court and educational accreditation board of Athens, meeting in the Stoa Basilikos.

B. Literary and historical parallels to the trial of Socrates (charged with introducing new gods before the Areopagus).

C. Sermon Rhetoric and Exordium (Acts 17:22-23):

1. Opening of the speech: addressing them as "highly religious" (deisidaimones, a polite but ambiguous term).
2. Utilizing the altar of the "Unknown God" (historical plague origins recorded by Epimenides) as an unassailable point of contact.

D. God's Self-Sufficiency and Transcendence (Acts 17:24-25):

1. God does not dwell in temples made with human hands (cheiropoiotos), agreeing with Stoic critiques of localized deity.
2. God has no need of human service or sacrifices (aprosdees, self-sufficient), plundering Greek philosophy to express biblical monotheism.

E. Humanity's Origin, Boundaries, and Search for God (Acts 17:26-29):

1. God determines national boundaries and historical epics (echoing Genesis 10 and Deuteronomy 32).
2. God as Creator/Father of all humanity (diaspora Jewish apologetic use of Zeus/Father language).
3. Quoting Greek Poets as Proof Texts:
 - a. "In him we live and move and have our being" (attributed to Epimenides of Crete).
 - b. "We are his offspring" (attributed to Aratus of Cilicia).
4. Critiquing idolatry: If we are God's offspring, we should not think the divine is like gold, silver, or stone shaped by human art.

VI. The Call to Repentance and Resurrection (Acts 17:30-31)

- A. Ignorance as a mitigating factor in past seasons, but now God commands all people everywhere to repent.
- B. Linear view of history: a concrete future moment of global judgment by an appointed Man (Jesus).
- C. The ultimate proof: Jesus' resurrection from the dead.
- D. Severe clash with Greek worldview: Greeks viewed the body as a tomb (soma sema) and sought release of the soul, rejecting bodily resurrection.

VII. The Divided Response and Key Converts (Acts 17:32-34)

- A. Mockery from some and polite postponement from others.
- B. Conversion of Dionysius the Areopagite (a highly influential high court/city council member) and Damaris (likely an educated, upper-class woman or philosopher).
- C. Introduction to the next mission in Corinth (Acts 18).