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The Unknown God of Athens: Acts 17 and the Religion of the Gentiles

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Explicit references to non-biblical religious texts are rare in the New Testament.¹ It is therefore all the more striking to find two consecutive references in a single verse of Acts 17:28. This rare combination deserves special attention. We shall study it by situating it in the context of the Athenian speech, of Luke's theology and finally of the New Testament in general.

I THE ATHENIAN SPEECH

1. The Place of the Speech in the Plan of Acts

The Athenian speech has more than an anecdotal interest. It is the second of the three major missionary speeches of Paul recorded in Acts. The first one, at Pisidian Antioch, is addressed to a Jewish audience (13:6-41); the Areopagus speech is addressed to Gentiles; the third one will be given to the representatives of the Christian community of Ephesus (20: 18-35). Luke has given a sample of Paul's language to the three main kinds of people with whom he had to exercise his ministry: Jews, Gentiles and the *tertium genus*, the Christians.

These three main speeches of Paul constitute a parallel to the three speeches of Peter on Pentecost day (2:14-40), in the Temple (3:12-20) and to Cornelius (10:34-43). Another set of three discourses will mark the captivity of Paul (to the crowd in the Temple 22:1-21; to Felix 24:10-21; to Agrippa 26:2-23), which corresponds also to the triple trial by the Sanhedrin, of Peter twice (4:8-12; 5:29-32) and of Stephen (7:2-53).²

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¹ 1 Cor. 15: 33 is a quotation from Menander's *Thais* and Tit. 1: 12 of Epimenides. Both texts are hardly "religious"; they are just moral considerations. The two quotations of Acts 17: 28 are therefore unique in the New Testament.

² Cf. G. Lohfink, *La Conversion de Saint Paul*, Paris: Cerf, 1967, pp. 71-72; J. Dupont, "Le Discourse à l' Areopage (Acts 17, 22-31) lieu de rencontre entre christianisme et hellenisme," *Bib* 60 (1979), pp. 531-534; P. Schubert, "The Place of the Areopagus Speech in the Composition of Acts," in J. C. Rylaardsdam ed., *Transitions in Biblical Scholarship*, Chicago, 1968, pp. 235-261.

Those remarks show that the Athenian speech is more than the candid record of what happened to Paul in Athens. The Athenian speech plays a structural role in the composition of Acts: it represents the preaching to the Gentiles; it has the value of a paradigm.

2. The Plan of the Speech

The plan of the Athenian discourse has often been discussed.³ It has been compared with the structure of the traditional Judaeo-Hellenistic polemic against idolatry.⁴ E. Schweizer has compared it with the structure of the speeches of Peter in Acts⁵ and finds two differences: the christological kerygma is replaced by a theological kerygma and "the proof from Scripture" is taken from Greek poets.⁶

Both reconstructions of the plan have valid points, especially the first one: it is true that the motifs of Acts 17 find their parallels in the Judaeo-Hellenistic literature. But both of them fail to take into account the christological contents of the Areopagus discourse. The "theological kerygma" does not replace the christological announcement: it is added to it. The proclamation to the Athenians is twofold. It announces the God who made the world (vv. 24-29) and Christ Jesus risen from the dead to be the judge of the unrepentant (vv. 30-31). It is true that the first part on God is more developed and that the name of Jesus is not mentioned in the second part. This is due to the fact that the discourse is interrupted when the word "resurrection" is uttered: Skilfully, Luke makes this discourse a kind of "unfinished symphony."⁷ Yet, the essential is said about Jesus: his death and resurrection, his eschatological role and the call to conversion which is for Luke the essence of the Gospel.⁸ In fact the best parallel to the structure of the address to the Athenians is found

³ See discussion and bibliography in J. Dupont, *art. cit.*, pp. 537-546.

⁴ Cf. B. Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, Uppsala, 1955.

⁵ E. Schweizer, "Concerning the Speeches of Acts," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. by L.E. Keck and J.L. Martyn, Nashville: Abingdon, 1966, pp. 208-214.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-213.

⁷ This would be my objection to the attempts made to reconstitute the plan of the Athenian Discourse on purely literary grounds. See, for instance, the latest attempt of J. Dupont, *art. cit.* These attempts have in common to take the discourse as a complete whole and to analyse its articulations and how the conclusion balances the introduction etc. But Luke wants precisely to show that the discourse was not completed. It was interrupted by the reaction to the idea of a resurrection. The Athenian Discourse is an *opus infinitum*.

⁸ Cf. W. Barclay, *Turning to God: A Study of Conversion in the Book of Acts and Today*, Philadelphia, 1964; U. Wilckens, *Die Missionsreden der Apostelgeschichte*, WMANT 5, Neukirchen, 1974, pp. 178-186.

in 1 Thess. 1:9-10 where commentators recognise a standard summary of the preaching to the non-Jews.⁹

	<i>1 Thess 1:9-10</i>	<i>Acts 17:24-31</i>
Theological kerygma	You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.	The God who made the world...does not live in shrines made by man nor is served by human hands.
Christological kerygma	and to wait for his Son Jesus Christ whom he raised from the dead Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.	a day on which he will judge the world by a man whom he has appointed by raising him from the dead.

The parallelism with the first part of the kerygmatic formula in 1 Thess. 1:9 is still more literal if we consider the speech of Lystra in Acts 14:15:

<i>1 Thess 1:9</i>	<i>Acts 14:15</i>
You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.	You should turn from these vain things to a living God who made heaven and earth.

The twofold kerygma on God and Christ is also reflected in the twofold confession of faith as it is found in 1 Cor. 8:6:

One God, the Father, from whom are all things...
One Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things...
(cf. 1 Cor. 12:2; 1 Tim. 2:5; 6:13; 2 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 6:1-2; Eph. 4:5-6)

Further echo of the twofold confession can also be perceived in Jn. 17:3:

This is the eternal life,
that they know thee the only true God
and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent.

It appears therefore that in constructing his speeches to Gentile audiences, Luke was weaving themes and even words from the common stock of the basic missionary proclamation to the non-Jews.¹⁰

⁹ Cf. B. Rigaux, *Les Epîtres aux Thessaloniens*, Paris: Gabalda, 1956 p. 178; J. Munck, "The Missionary Preaching of Paul," *NTS* 9 (1963), p. 101.

¹⁰ Cf. U. Wilckens, *Die Missionsreden der Apostelgeschichte*, *op. cit.* p. 87; J. Fitzmyer, "Acts of the Apostles," in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer and R. E. Murphy, Bangalore: TPI, 1980, Vol. II, p. 200.

3. The Validity of the Speech

The position of the Athenian speech in the structure of the Acts of the Apostles and the structure of the speech itself show that it represents the Lucan version of a paradigmatic pattern of presentation of the Gospel to the Gentiles. If the Jews had to receive the Good News concerning Jesus Christ, the Gentiles had also to be told of the one true God: hence the two-pronged kerygma summarised in 1 Thess. 1:9-10 and developed in Acts 17.

This naturally supposes that Luke considers the Athenian discourse as a valid form of preaching. This has often been at least implicitly denied by the many authors who consider the Areopagus discourse as a failure.¹¹ After his failure in Athens, Paul would have drawn the conclusion that it had been a mistake to use "lofty words of wisdom." This is why, on coming to Corinth, the following stage of his second missionary journey, Paul decided "to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). The pure proclamation of the Christian message should not be adulterated with recourse to human wisdom. In that reconstruction of Paul's reactions during his second missionary journey, the Athenian speech stands as an example of the way one should not preach; it just shows a dead end of Christian preaching.

This interpretation is untenable.

1. First it is methodologically unsound to explain Acts 17 by 1 Cor., Luke by Paul, as if we could presume perfect homogeneity of thinking between the two. It is always risky to explain one author by another. It is all the more so in the case of Luke and Paul who have widely divergent visions of the Church and of its mission.¹²

2. It is most improbable that the Athenian speech reproduces the exact wording or even pattern of Paul's actual discourse on the Areopagus.¹³

3. It is a strange assumption to suppose that Luke would have quoted a discourse of Paul *in extenso* to illustrate what ought not to be done. It would be a unique instance of that kind of literary device. Or should one presume also that the Nazareth discourse of Jesus in Lk 4 is another example of *praedicatio falsi*?

4. Actually the Athenian discourse ends in the same way as the other missionary sermons in the Acts. It meets partly with

¹¹ See list of authors in J. Dupont, *art. cit.*, p. 535, n. 10. It seems to be a prevailing interpretation among R.C. commentators. It is even accepted by J.A. Fitzmyer in the other section of the JBC where he deals with the "Life of Paul," *op. cit.*, p. 220.

¹² See *infra*, section II.

¹³ On the historicity of the speeches of Acts, see J.A. Fitzmyer, "Acts of the Apostles," *op. cit.*, p. 167.

success and partly with failure. It is a sign of contradiction that provokes both faith on the part of Dionysius, Damaris and a few others, and incredulity in the others. Such was the case at Pisidian Antioch (13:44), Iconium (14:1-2), Philippi (16:14-24), Thessalonica (17:4-5). It is rather more successful than Jesus' inaugural discourse in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4:22, 28-29). Paul's preaching in Athens, as in the other places, is just an illustration of the parable of the sower. When the Word is sown, much of it is lost for various reasons; but enough of it remains which fell on good ground to bring forth fruit (Lk 8:4-15).

We can conclude with the words of Haenchen: "Luke would not have presented the picture of this particular event to his reader if it had not possessed a very special meaning for him; it was so to speak a kind of programme for the mission." Haenchen concludes with the words of Dibelius: "So one preaches—so one should preach."¹⁴

4. The References to Greek Poets

Such is the context in which appear the two quotations of Greek poets in v. 28.

"We are indeed his offspring" is a text of Aratus of Soli.¹⁵ Clement of Alexandria seems to have been the first to identify the text (*Strom.* 1.19;94.4f.). Aratus, born ca 310 BC, was a friend of Zeno the Stoic and "his writings show considerable stoic influence."¹⁶ The words quoted in Acts 17:28 taken from the prologue of his *Phaenomena*, a treatise in verse on Astronomy, were long used as a school text book. Aratus was a countryman of Paul since his family was either from Tarsus itself or from neighbouring Soli. He must have been a local glory. It was certainly very skilful of Luke to insert a quotation from the Cilician philosopher in the discourse of the other famous Cilician, Paul of Tarsus. How did Luke come to know that text? Had it become a current slogan of the Hellenistic world or had Luke, in his school days, been given the *Phaenomena* to study as a text book?

The other text is, "In him we live and move and have our being." This verse has been traced back to Epimenides, a more ancient and hoary figure, half lost in legend, since Epimenides is a Pre-Socratic, one of the Seven Sages of Greece, reported to

¹⁴ E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1971, p. 530. Other authors are quoted in L. Legrand, "The Missionary Significance of the Areopagus Speech," in *God's Word Among Men. Theological Essays in Honour of J. Putz*, ed. G. Gispert-Sauch, Delhi, 1974, pp. 59-63.

¹⁵ Cf. K. Lake in F. J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity*; Part I, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. V. Additional Notes, London, 1932, pp. 246-251.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

have lived up to the age of 150 or even 299.¹⁷ According to Ishodad, the same poem of Epimenides from which Acts 17 takes a verse contained also the jibe on Cretans quoted in Tit. 1:12.¹⁸ This is almost too beautiful to be true. Moreover the question can be raised of whether the quotation of Acts 17:28 is a deliberate quotation from Epimenides or rather a philosophical slogan which "had passed into a commonplace."¹⁹ Kirsopp Lake thinks it is less probable. Is it? The Hymn of Cleanthes to Zeus says:

Unto Thou all flesh is allowed to speak for we are thy offspring. . .

We alone among all that lives and moves mortal on earth.²⁰

This expression of Stoic religiosity proves that the themes and words cited by Luke had become part of the religious patrimony of the Hellenistic world. Even if he was conscious of quoting individual authors, he did not do it as an exercise in academic research but as a typical expression of the living religious tradition in which the Hellenistic culture of the First Century was deeply steeped. If Luke's readers were aware that one of the texts went back to Epimenides, the image that came to their mind was that of "a man loved by the gods and learnt in divine things as regards the inspiration of mysteries,"²¹ a kind of pagan "prophet."²² At any rate, the texts quoted evoked some of the most moving accents of the Stoic religious quest. In the New Testament days, Stoicism had become much more than a "philosophical system," a merely academic exercise in correct thinking. It embodied a religious quest and, in its hymns, its dogma, its missionary drive, it had taken several features of an organised religion.²³ Its mystical drive would soon be further developed in neo-platonism.

Therefore we see how the texts quoted in the Areopagus speech rang in the ears of Luke and of his readers.

They do not mean, as E. Schweizer has suggested, that, in the Athenian speech, the Old Testament is replaced by Greek poetry. They would not even have been considered as "Scriptures," as texts constitutive of divine tradition. From the viewpoint of a Hellenistic theory of inspiration, they were not considered as

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 249-250.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

²⁰ On the Hymn to Zeus of Cleanthes, see R. P. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. II, Paris: Gabalda, 1949, pp. 310-340.

²¹ Plutarch, *Solon*, 12:7.

²² The word "prophet" is used in Tit 1:12.

²³ Cf. Cl. Préaux, *Le Monde Hellénistique*, Tome 2, Paris: PUF, 1978, pp. 644-646; R. P. Festugière, *loc. cit.*

“ oracles ,” like the mantic sayings of the Delphic Pythia. They evoked man’s groping towards God rather than an oracular voice of revelation, a “ Scripture .”

On the other hand, they meant more than what philosophical speculation is for us, more than a merely mental exercise, an individual foray into the boundaries of human thinking. In the Greek world, Stoicism, soon to be succeeded by Neo-Platonism, was a religious event in the full sense of the term. In the meeting on the Hill of Ares, Luke saw more than an encounter between the Christian message and Athenian intelligentsia. In the person of Paul, the Gospel had met the quest for God of the world in one of its most lofty forms. What was the tone of that encounter ?

5. The Stance of Acts 17 towards Greek Religiosity

5.1. A Positive Approach

The approach is obviously positive. The speech begins with a pleasant *captatio benevolentiae* (v. 22: “ you are very religious”). The starting point is taken from a feature of Greek religion (v. 23: “ among the objects of your worship, I observed . . .”). Men are described as “ seeking God, ” groping for him ” (v. 27). Greek authors are quoted favourably (v. 28). Even the failures of Greek religion are excused as “ ignorance ” that God “ over-looks ” (v. 30).

It has also been argued that the core of the argument has been taken from Stoic philosophy : “ He made from one (principle) every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitations ” (v. 26). M. Dibelius has shown the Stoic overtones of this text.²⁴ The *logos* is the one principle underlying all realities, principle of order and harmony as can be seen in the rhythm of the seasons (“ allotted periods”) and the alternance of sea and land, cultivated lands and deserts (“ boundaries ”). But this interpretation has been questioned and the verse has also been given an interpretation in terms of the biblical viewpoint. “ He created every nation from one (common ancestor: Adam) . . . having determined their times (the successive ages of the various nations succeeding each other as, for instance, in Dan. 2 and 7) and their habitations (cf. Gen. 10 ; Deut. 32:8). ”²⁵

Between the two translations and interpretations, it is difficult to make a choice. Either of the two interpretations is perfectly consistent and can be documented by convincing evidence. One

²⁴ M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, London: SCM, 1956, p. 57.

²⁵ B. Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech*, *op. cit.*; W. Eltester, “ Schopfungsoffenbarung und naturliche Theologie im frühen Christentum, ” *NTS* 3 (1956-1957), p. 101; J. Fitzmyer, “ Acts of the Apostles, ” *op. cit.*, p. 200.

might even think that Luke used ambiguous language deliberately to show how, in Athens, the Christian message stood at the cross roads of Israel and the Nations.

5.2. A Critical Approach

At the same time, Luke's appreciation of the religious quest of the Athenians does not go without qualifications.

(a) The Athenians are *deisidemonesteroi* (v. 22). The word may mean "very religious" as rendered in the RSV. In the context of a *captatio benevolentiae*, it must be a flattering term. But it may also mean bigoted, superstitious, literally "demon-fearing." The reader who has just read in v. 16 that "Paul's spirit was provoked . . . because he saw the town full of idols" cannot but have second thoughts on the piety of the Athenians and wonder whether the language of the apostle is not ironical.

(b) The Unknown God. The starting point of the speech is not taken from any of the gods of the Hellenistic pantheon, the significance of which could be considered as a "seed of the word" or a hidden image of Christ. The point where the dialogue originates is precisely the confession of ignorance of the Athenians. Unlike the Letter of Aristeas (15), the Athenian speech does not say that Gentiles really know God even when they call him Zeus or Dis. The message meets the Greek quest at the point where it confesses that God is unknown.²⁶ The true God is a hidden God (Isa. 64 : 3). None can meet God but in the "cloud of unknowing."

(c) The theme of "unknowing" is strongly underlined. The fact that the real God of the Athenians is *agnostos* is resumed in the participle *agnoountes* in the following clause: what therefore you worship, on your admission, without knowing . . . Again the theme will appear in the conclusion where the time before the coming of Christ is described as a time of *agnoia* (v. 30).²⁷

(d) The link between the Athenian "object of worship" and the God announced by Paul is somewhat qualified by the fact that the "unknown God" is spoken of with a neuter pronoun in v. 23: "To the unknown God (masc . . .) . . . what (neuter) you worship . . . this (neuter) I announce to you." The transition is not from a Greek God to the God of Jesus Christ but from *what* that God represents, i.e., its incognisability, to what the message makes known.

(e) The construction of the discourse lays great stress on the negative clauses. In the first part (vv. 24-25), the main clauses are negative ("does not live . . . is not served . . ."), the other positive clauses being grammatically subordinate ("the God who gives . . . since he himself . . ."). The second part draws its

²⁶ The translation of the RSV is excellent: "What you worship as unknown."

²⁷ Cf. J. Dupont, *art. cit.*, p. 541.

conclusion again in a negative clause ("we ought not to think . . . v. 29). The positive appeal to the Greek Stoic religious feeling and the beautiful quotations borrowed from that tradition should not blind the reader to the criticism implied in those negative sentences which play a major structural role in the construction of the discourse.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Acts 17 represents a positive stance towards the surrounding religious world. But this appreciation is balanced by a criticism which is no less lucid and firm for being put in sedate terms.

6.2. Acts 17 does not represent an attitude of confrontation. But neither can it be simply identified with a theology of fulfilment à la Farquhar. We can speak of an attitude of dialogue but the term is so vague that it can be of little use.²⁸ We may speak of dialogue but on condition that we are aware that this dialogue does not shun criticism and that it meets the unknown God of Athens mostly through the bias of a negative theology. If we may conclude by transposing the line of thinking of Acts 17 to the Indian context, we shall find the equivalent to the "unknown God" in the Upanishadic *neti neti*: access to God can only be in an apophatic confession of unknowing.

II LUKE AND PAUL

There is a spectacular contrast between Acts 17 and Rom. 1. This contrast is one of the strong arguments to prove the redactional activity of Luke in Acts. It could hardly be the same man who wrote Rom. 1 and pronounced the sermon of Acts 17.²⁹

But it would be superficial just to oppose Luke and Paul as representing two mentalities, two spiritualities that could be qualified, according to one's theological options, as positive for Luke and negative for Paul, or as "proto-catholic" for Luke and "protestant" for Paul.

The difference between Luke and Paul is at the same time deeper and less absolute.

It is less absolute in the sense that Paul and Acts 17 are not simply contradictory. Luke, as we saw, is critical of the Athenian religiosity; Paul, on his part, does accept in Rom. 1 the possibility of a valid quest for God from "the things that have been made" (Rom. 1 : 19-21).

It is deeper in the sense that it is not just a matter of religious psychology and feeling. Luke's positive approach towards

²⁸ I would like here to qualify and specify what I wrote earlier in "The Missionary Significance," *art. cit.*, pp. 69-71.

²⁹ Cf. P. Vielhauer, "On the 'Paulinism' of Acts," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-50.

the historical quest of Greece for God is paralleled by his positive assessment of Israel, of its history and its Law.³⁰ Paul's negative attitude towards the Gentiles is balanced by an equal criticism of Israel. Luke is directed by a consistent view of *Heilsgeschichte*, a conception of history—either of Israel or of the Nations—loaded with salvific significance. Paul represents the viewpoint of the judgement, judgement on the Nations as well as judgement on Israel. Paul's viewpoint is eschatological : Israel and the Nations, in Rom. 1-3, stand on trial and are pronounced equally guilty by God's eschatological tribunal ; there remains only the possibility of the grace of God in Jesus Christ received in faith. Luke's viewpoint is that of history ; the grace of God works through the medium of time and of a human community³¹ and, once return is made to history, it is found that

very deep is the well of the past, fathom less.³²

One could dramatize this divergence of outlook between Luke and Paul. It must be kept in mind that their viewpoints correspond to different historical situations : Paul, a man of the first Christian generation, experienced the dazzling newness of Christ. Luke, a man who lived and wrote in the eighties, and possibly even later, experienced a protracted ongoing history.

The history of Christian tradition continued to reflect those two tendencies. But it should not be forgotten that Luke considered himself as a faithful disciple of Paul and that both Acts 17 and Rom. 1 belong to the Scriptures we recognize as Word of God. The challenge of the tension between those two texts and the men who wrote them is, for those who sympathise with Paul's vibrant protest against the world and sense of the newness of Christ, to be realistically aware that this newness has been made flesh and therefore has been submitted to the slow pace and frustrating process of human growth : and for those who share in Luke's "proto-catholic" concern for continuity and history, to remember that any history, any human action and thinking, stand under the judgement of God's Word. An integral theology of religion should be able to listen to both Bonhoeffer and R. Panikkar.

³⁰ Cf. P. Vielhauer, *art. cit.*, pp. 37-42; A. George, "Israel dans l'oeuvre de Luc," *RB* 75 (1968), pp. 481-525.

³¹ Cf. F. Bovon, "L'importance des médiations dans le projet théologique de Luc," *NTS* 21 (1974-1975), pp. 23-39.

³² Quoted by J. Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976, p. 47.