

Paul At Mars Hill, Athens: The Gospel to Pagan Philosophers

**Historical Context: Socrates: 469-399 BC. Rome Conquers Greece: 146 BC. Christ: 4 BC-31 AD. Jerusalem: 70, 135 AD
Tiberius: 14-37. Claudius: 41-54. Nero: 54-68. Vaspasian 69-79, Titus: 79-81; Domitian 81-96. Trajan: 98-117; Hadrian: 117-138**

Cultural and Intellectual Background of his Audience:

The established religion at Athens: Polytheism; Worship of the forces of nature personified as gods and goddesses; Idolatry.

The Epicureans

Followers of Epicurus: 342-270 BC

Teachings:

- There is no personal Creator
- Matter is eternal. Evolutionary and Pantheistic model.
- Self-organizing by the attraction and repulsion of atoms
- No Answer to how the personal arises out of the impersonal
- Rejected polytheism w/o openly renouncing the gods
- Remembered the fate of Socrates in 399 BC

- The gods are too removed from man
- Uninvolved in the affairs of men
- Needed no sacrifices
- Answered no prayers. Provided no redemption

- Man saves himself on earth
- But there was no hope beyond the grave
- The great evil of the world was religious superstition
- It was the source of crime and misery
- It enslaved the minds of men

- Man's goal was the attainment of happiness
- First step: discard the idea of a judgment & punishment
- Second step: Happiness is pleasurable emotions
- But the pursuit of pleasure often brought pain:
- So avoid sensual excesses. Moderation is key

- No Higher Moral Law
- Human laws are mere conventions for ordering society
- Each man was arbiter of the lawfulness of his pleasures

Results of their philosophy:

- A few examples of moderation and self-restraint
- But suppressed only symptoms of sin. Heart unchanged.
- The shift away from the gross idolatry of polytheism was good
- Majority of men chose life of ease and self-indulgence
- Many sank into animalism: Moral and sexual degradation
- The slow moral and cultural death of a civilization

The Stoics

Followers of Zeno: 340-260BC

Took name from painted porch (stoa) in the Agora

Teachings:

- Known as Greek Pharisees for their strict obedience to law
- Divine mind, logos, pervades the universe; ordered its affairs
- A Divine authority rules in affairs of nations & men
- Yet men retained freedom of will.

- Salvation comes by works of obedience
- Human nature is not fallen.
- Men can aspire to ethical perfection:
- They lived by a manual of ethics
- Believed that man can work out his own salvation

- Man controlled his own destiny on earth
- True wisdom: Be master, not the slave of circumstances
- Things beyond our control to be accept with equanimity

- Results of their philosophy
- In aiming at unconcern they lost sympathy with others
- Seeking ethical perfection masked selfishness & corruption
- The felt they needed no pardon or redemption

The Sophists

Began in the 5th century BC. Protagoras etc.

- Man is the measure of all things
- Knowledge and truth are therefore relative
- What each man knew became truth to him
- Attracted a lot of pseudo intellectuals in Rome
- When Pilate said What is truth?
- He did not wait for an answer. Truth was relative

Roman Culture

- Rome borrowed its culture from Greece.
- A practical & militaristic people they left philosophy to the Greeks
- Early Romans were animists: Spirits lived in nature
- After 1st. century many Emperors became Stoics
- Law, order, temperance, moderation produced longest empire

Paul's Discourse: Athens

Remembering the fate of Socrates,
Paul avoided a direct attack on their gods
An altar to the "unknown god" gave him an opening
Hedging their bets: Just in case we left a god out.
"You are too superstitious" resonated w/- Epicurians
The God you worship unknowingly I present
He is the Creator of heaven and earth
This ranks him above all gods. Jer. 10:10-12
He does not dwell in man-made temples
He needs no rituals from unregenerate man
For He gives life and breath and all things

The Creator made of one blood all nations and men
We all came from Adam - not offspring of gods
He determined the locations of each nation
He determined their boundaries. Deut 32: 8

He determined the times. Dan. 2: 19-21:
He predicted events and intervened in affairs
That we might come to know him and seek him

Since we are the offspring of the real God
Do not reduce God to idols of gold and stone

God winked or forgave this ignorance
But now commands all men to repent
For God has set a day of judgment

He has appointed the judge of men
Even Christ whom he raised from the dead
He resurrected him to give men assurance

Results of discourse:
Some mocked upon hearing the resurrection
Some said "let us talk later" but Paul left Athens
A handful accepted the truth
Became the center of an influential church