

The speech in Lystra (Acts 14:15-17)

In Romans 1:18-2:16, Paul teaches about natural revelation.¹ In two speeches to the Gentiles – the first in Lystra (Acts 14) and the second on Areopagos (Acts 17) – Paul makes reference to natural revelation. It is therefore interesting to study Paul’s use of natural revelation in the two addresses and to compare with Romans 1-2. Here, we shall examine Paul’s preaching in Lystra. It is a general interpretation of the speech in Lystra, that for Paul natural revelation is a preparation for the gospel and that he has a mild and tolerant perspective on idolatry. In Romans 1:18-32 he expresses himself differently. Here mankind rejected natural revelation and substituted idolatry for God. Natural revelation is not a preparation for the gospel. In this article I will closely examine the speech in Lystra focusing on Paul’s perspective on natural revelation and idols, and I will draw comparisons with Romans 1:18-32 with the intention of looking at this difference. I begin with describing the situation in Lystra, I analyze verses 15-17 step by step, describe how Paul contextualizes the gospel, and finally, I summarize the perspective on natural revelation and idols. As regards the latter, I will draw comparisons with Romans 1:18-32.

1. The situation in Lystra

According to Acts 14:6, Paul and Barnabas fled to Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding country. There, they preach the gospel, and Paul heals a man in Lystra who had been lame from birth (14:8-10). This healing has a number of violent consequences. There are people present. They shout in Lycaonian: “The gods have come down to us in human form!” (14:11). The people identify Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes (14:12). The priest from the temple of Zeus brought bulls and wreaths to offer sacrifices to them together with the crowd (14:13).

Verses 11-13 describe the reaction to this healing, which we can use to trace a number of elements in the Lycaonians’ religious worldview.² They operate with a heavenly world populated by gods (cf. “have come down” 14:11). They worship the gods from the Greek pantheon (Zeus and Hermes).³ Subsequent to the Hellenization of the area, Zeus and Hermes have been melted together

¹ I refrain from using the term “natural theology” on the grounds that it is ambiguous. Instead, I use two other terms: Natural revelation, where “revelation” is to be taken in an objective sense referring to God having revealed himself in creation, nature and food and joy. When speaking of “revelation”, I am thinking exclusively of the objective aspect of revelation. I also use the term knowledge, where “knowledge” is to be understood subjectively, referring to man’s knowledge of the God who has revealed himself in creation, nature and food and joy.

² Their shouts in Lycaonian indicate that Barnabas and Paul meet the local population, not Roman colonists. Bechard, *Paul*, p.413, characterizes them as “primitive rustics”.

³ Zeus was the god of weather, who brought thunder and rain, and the god of vegetation, who brought the fruits and harvest; see Breytenbach, *Zeus*, pp. 399-404.

with local gods.⁴ They have probably also worshipped other gods, i.e. they are polytheists. They believe that the gods can intervene and change things in this world. They interpret the healing of the crippled man as a divine act.⁵ They believe that gods can appear in human form in this world.⁶ Sacrifices and worship via sacrifices in temples are a part of this religious worldview. The Lycaonians' reaction to the healing is an example of a contextualization. They interpret the healing on the basis of their polytheistic framework of understanding and integrate Barnabas and Paul within this framework. They refer to Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes, because he is the chief speaker.⁷ This contextualization demonstrates the strength of their religiosity; at the same time, they neutralize the apostle's message.⁸

In Lystra, Paul meets a double challenge: the Lycaonians' contextualization and the polytheism inherent in their religious worldview. Paul takes up the first challenge with his warning against bringing sacrifices to them (14:15ab).⁹ Paul addresses the second challenge in the continuation of his message in verses 15cd-17. He preaches a different religious worldview.

This is the situation in Lystra and the double challenge, Paul meets. In the following we will examine how Paul meets this challenge and examine verses 15-17 step by step.

2. The message (14:15-17)

The Lycaonians want to bring sacrifices to Barnabas and Paul. This challenge Paul meets with a warning (verse 15ab). Paul addresses the crowd with the words: "Men, why are you doing this?" The question is a warning. First, Paul points out that he and Barnabas are people, just like (ὁμοιοπαθεῖς) the Lycaonians. Barnabas and Paul are not gods. Next, Paul justifies his warning with the fact that they are people proclaiming the gospel (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι), calling them to turn to the living God. He is the one they must honor and serve. The situation in Lystra is unique, but two relations indicate that the message is a typical element in Paul's teaching to the Gentiles.

⁴ Breytenbach, *Zeus*, pp. 399-400 and 404-407, writes about local weather and vegetation gods that have been identified with Zeus.

⁵ Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 183, writes: "Even after hearing the initial proclamation of the gospel this miracle only affirmed their pagan outlook and nourished and deepened idolatrous commitment rather than weakened it by showing up the impotence of their pagan deities." Schnabel, *Mission II*, p. 1166, writes: "The citizens of Lystra interpreted the miracle not as authentication of the missionaries and their message. Rather, they integrated the miracle into their traditional religiosity."

⁶ Ovid tells a legend about how Zeus and Hermes appeared in human form in Frygien; they wandered around, but with the exception of an elderly couple, nobody showed them any hospitality. The elderly couple was richly rewarded, while everyone who rejected Zeus and Hermes were punished (see Breytenbach, *Zeus*, pp. 400-401).

⁷ On Hermes' functioning as representative and messenger for his father, Zeus, see Martin, *Gods*, p. 155.

⁸ Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 183.

⁹ They rip their garments as an expression of their horror over the blasphemy (cf. Mark 14:63) and plunge into the crowd in order to stop them from what they are doing.

1) Paul and Barnabas refer to themselves as “human beings, who are proclaiming the gospel” (ἄνθρωποι εὐαγγελιζόμενοι), and proceed to preach the gospel in the message that follows. The content of the gospel is presented in verses 15cd-17. The same verb (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι) is used in verse 7, the verse which describes how Barnabas and Paul preach the good news. As we find the same verb (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι) in verse 15, verses 15cd-17 are determined to be preaching of the gospel.

2) Using εὐαγγελιζόμενοι, Lukas describes Barnabas and Paul as proclaiming the gospel. This describes practice. On that background, Paul’s proclamation of the good news provides an example of practice.

The proclamation of the gospel is not just the call to conversion (verse 15c); verses 15d-17 belong to the gospel, as all three parts represent a continued description of the living God, who the Lycaonians are supposed to turn to.¹⁰ When addressing Jews and God-fearers, Paul could base his teachings on two assumptions: monotheistic beliefs and the OT as revelation. These two conditions are not found among the Gentiles. He therefore begins with the proclamation that there is one living God; here, he draws a link to natural revelation. A monotheistic perception of God is the basis and condition for the proclamation of Jesus Christ. In his speech in Lystra, Paul lends a number of expressions and phrases from the Old Testament, but Paul does not quote directly from the OT nor does he point out that he is using the OT. He does not appeal to the authority of the OT. This is because the GT has no authority as revelation among the Gentiles.

Paul addresses the crowd with the words: “Men, why are you doing this?” The question is a warning. First, Paul points out that he and Barnabas are people, just like (ὅμοιοπαθεῖς) the Lycaonians. Barnabas and Paul are not gods. Next, Paul justifies his warning with the fact that they are people proclaiming the gospel (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι), calling them to turn to the living God. He is the one they must honor and serve.

Paul calls the Lycaonians to turn away from their empty gods.¹¹ Paul uses τὰ μάτια when referring to the idols. This is the only instance we find this expression in reference to idols in the NT.¹² It is known from LXX, where it is used a number of times in reference to idols (3 King 16:2; 16:13; 16:26; 4 King 17:15, Esther 4:17; Jeremiah 2:5 and 8:19). The term itself and the contrast to the living God indicate that the empty gods are dead and inactive. Paul’s speech includes a clear element of confrontation. The use of the term “empty gods” is a total rejection of their gods:

¹⁰ Wilckens, *Missionsreden*, p. 87.

¹¹ The call to turn from gods and to God is found many times in the OT God; see e.g. Psalm 96 and Jeremiah 10:6-17.

¹² Paul uses the verb ματαιόω in connection with idolatry in Romans 1:21.

They are without significance; cannot intervene in the history of mankind, and they cannot provide rain and fertile times (verse 17). In reference to their own ways (verse 16), their idolatry is stated to be the “way” of the Gentiles as opposed to the way of God. The call to conversion includes a total rejection of their idolatry: It is out of touch with the living God.¹³ Paul calls the Lycaonians to turn to the living God, i.e. honor, thank and obey the living God.¹⁴ Verses 15d-17 represent an explication of “the living God”. Paul does not explicitly proclaim that God is one – but it is implicit in the proclamation that there is one God in contrast to the idols via the call to conversion; via the description of the living God as creator; via his permission to the people; and via the description of his goodness: rain and harvest and food and joy. The living God is characterized in greater detail in verses 15b-17.

God’s creation (verse 15d)

The Lycaonians’ contextualization is the first challenge, Paul meets. He warns them against bringing sacrifices to Barnabas and himself, and he calls them to turn to the living God. The Lycaonians’ religious worldview with its polytheism is the second challenge, Paul meets. He addresses this in the continuation of his message in verses 15cd-17. He preaches a different religious worldview and proclaims the living God. In verses 15d-17 Paul characterizes the living God. The first part is verse 15d: “Who made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them” (Exodus 20:11).¹⁵ Paul identifies “the living God” as the creator, thus legitimizing God as the only and living God. Paul uses the creation to substantiate God as the only and living God (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:6).¹⁶ As the Creator, the living God is the Lord of the universe.¹⁷ God is therefore a god who lays claim to the life and existence of humankind. This is now illustrated in Paul’s call to conversion. Paul does not say that the creation reveals God, but in the analogy with mention of God’s acts in connection with the changing seasons and harvest and joy (verse 17), which is testimony to the living God, God’s actions in creation are testimony about God.¹⁸ God has created everything in the original and the continued creation (cf. “everything in them”), and God has been

¹³ Contra Fournier, *Episode*, p. 68, who writes in connection with the call to turn away from the empty idols and to the living God, that “this does not appear as a negative judgment of the past.”

¹⁴ We find a clear parallel to this in 1 Thessalonians 1:9.

¹⁵ The words ἐποίησεν ... τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς correspond to LXX’s rendering of Exodus 20:11. The words are included as part of the background for the Sabbath commandment.

¹⁶ See Kjær, *Afguder* [Idols], p. 69-71. This is entirely in accordance with the OT (cf. e.g. Isaiah 44 and 45). Here, the prophets substantiate that Israel’s God is the only God – in opposition to the idols – with the fact that God is the creator.

¹⁷ The characterization of God as creator stands as the justification for the call to turn to the living God. The call is thereby based on God as creator and again demonstrates that creation has an inherent claim on the lives and existence of humankind.

¹⁸ Cf. Fournier, *Episode*, p. 68 and Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 187.

and is actively present as creator within the creation. In as much as everything in the original and the continued creation is testimony about God, God is revealed as the creator. In the first part of the explication of “the living God”, Paul draws a connection to natural revelation. He re-reveals an aspect of the natural revelation.

God’s permission (verse 16)

Paul has characterized the living God as the Creator. This is the first characterization. In verse 16 follows the second characterization of the living God: “In the past, he let all nations¹⁹ go their own way.” Paul identifies “the living God” as the God that holds dominion over the people and a claim on them. The very formulation “he let” expresses both power and claim.²⁰ “The living God” is therefore not one god among others, with limited powers and a limited area.²¹ The universal power and claim of God legitimizes that he is the one and living God. The verb “he let” formulates a relationship to the people. They are operating under the permission of God. This is the case for the people in the past and present – for Lycaonians until now. In this relationship, God is present with his power, his claim and his permission.²² The phrase “in the past” expresses a limitation, and this limitation is amplified when combined together with the call to conversion. The “past” now belongs to the past. The “past” is both salvation-historical and person-historical. On the level of salvation history, the death and resurrection of Christ ushers in a new age. It is now the age of the gospel; also for the Gentiles. On the level of personal history, a new age is ushered in with the arrival of the good news to the individual, to a group or a city. Something happens in conjunction with the first encounter with the proclamation of the gospel: it is the end of the past.²³ God has permitted all of the nations “to go their own way.” The “way” of the Gentiles is a description of their idolatry.²⁴

The wording “has let” (εἰῶσεν) has given occasion to two different interpretations. The first interpretation understands “has let” as God’s acceptance of their idolatry. God has not

¹⁹ τὰ ἔθνη is the people minus Israel. God allowed all people, with the exception of Israel, to go their own way.

²⁰ Cf. Lerle, *Predigt*, p. 51, who writes that “der heidnischen Väter unter die Allmacht des göttlichen Waltens steht.” Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 188.

²¹ Flemming, *Contextualization*, p. 69.

²² Fournier, *Episode*, p. 68, correctly writes: “God has always been present to the nations, allowing them to follow their paths (v. 16) and witnessing to the life-giving presence by sending rains and fruitful seasons.”

²³ Cf. Lerle, *Predigt*, p. 52.

²⁴ The meaning of “...go their own way” can be specified in relation to the context. 1) it is temporally limited to the past via “In the past...” and via the call to conversion, i.e. prior to the proclamations issued by Barnabas and Paul. 2) It is religiously determined by the call to turn away from the empty idols. This qualifies “...go their own way” as wandering in the worship of false idols. Their existence was characterized by the worship of empty idols. 3) It is legally determined by the call to conversion, as it implies that their lives as idolators stand under God’s judgment. 4) It is determined by revelation theology by the natural revelation in verses 15d and 17. This qualifies “...go their own way” as living in idolatry under God’s testimony.

given the people his special revelation. They are therefore ignorant about God²⁵, for which reason they worship empty idols. God's permission is an expression of God's tolerance. The Gentiles are entirely or partially without guilt when worshipping idols due to their ignorance.²⁶ In this interpretation, God's testimony of himself through the changing of the seasons with fertile times, harvest and joy have hypothetical significance.²⁷ There is talk of what God's testimony (verse 17) should have led to but did not.²⁸ In this interpretation, we add the entirely different perspective drawn from Romans 1:18ff. Here, the Gentiles are guilty because of their rejection of God's revelation through his acts.

According to the second interpretation, the idolatry takes place on the background of a rejection of God's testimony of himself. Idolatry is therefore under the judgment of God, and the term "has let" means that God has withheld his judgment.²⁹ The understanding of "has let" hinges on the Gentiles being ignorant about God, as this ignorance justifies the positive interpretation of "has let". On the basis of verses 15d and 17, however, it is impossible to talk about the people's ignorance of God; which thus rejects the first interpretation. The phrasing "has let" means that God withholds his judgment over their idolatry. This is a result of God's tolerance (cf. Rom 2:4).

Paul identifies the living God as the God that holds dominion over the people and a claim on them; the God who manifests this power and claim by granting permission and displaying tolerance. The living God is actively present in the lives and history of the people through his power

²⁵ "...go their own way" is often interpreted as an expression of ignorance about God. Mosbech, *Apostlenes*, p. 161, interprets this in revelation theological terms ("as he did not give them any form of adapted revelation"). Bruce, *Acts (Greek)*, p. 283, "... that until the full revelation of God came to the Gentiles, He overlooked their errors in so far as these arose from ignorance of His will," Bruce, *Acts*, p. 294, has the same interpretation. Haenchen, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 411, writes that verse 16 ought to be understood as an "entschuldigende Erklärung". Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 161, writes about an "entschuldigenden Erklärung" and adds: "Die Heiden blieben bislang ohne (Wort-)Offenbarung, und sie gingen deswegen in die Irre." Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, p. 89, writes: "Zur nachsicht Gottes (weil die Heiden durch ihre ἄγνοια teilweise entschuldigt werden)". Schille, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 307, writes: "Ähnlich 17,30 wird der Denkfehler der Heiden (sachlich der Juden-predigt 3,17 analog!) mit Hilfe des Gedankens der Nachsicht Gottes entschuldigt." Marshall, *Acts*, p. 239, interprets "...go their own way" as an expression of ignorance: "In time past he had let the Gentiles live in their own ways, the implication being that he did not regard their ignorance of himself as culpable." Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 161, writes about "einer entschuldigen Erklärung". Barrett, *Acts I*, p. 681, writes: "How was it that they had not known them? Because, with the exception of his people, Israel, who are not mentioned here, he had himself withdrawn from human affairs to the extent of leaving all the Gentiles to manage on their own affairs." Lerle, *Predigt*, p. 52 interprets "go their own way" ethically, but this is foreign to the context; Lerle also writes about an excuse on account of ignorance (pp. 51-53), but that is in relation to ethics and not their idolatry. Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 380, rejects any talk of excuse.

²⁶ Fournier, *Episode*, p. 76, interprets "he let" positively and writes that the living God "has shown goodness in the past by allowing the nations to walk in their ways."

²⁷ Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte II*, pp. 58-59, writes that it is doubtful, because of verse 17, whether Gentiles are to be excused, but nevertheless writes about the hypothetical character of the revelation.

²⁸ Barrett, *Acts I*, pp. 681-682, is typical when he writes: "but this does not mean that his hand could not be discerned by anyone who was minded to look for it." "In the bounty of nature there was testimony to both the being and the nature of God, though (as v. 16 indicates) the testimony was not forced upon the Gentiles."

²⁹ Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 21.

(permission) and tolerance (withholding judgment). At the same time, “has let” and “go their own way” imply a form of divine abandonment: their idolatry lacks contact with God. In the second part of the explication of “the living God”, Paul draws associations to natural revelation, as the permission is set together with God’s revelation as creator and Lord (verse 15d) and God as benefactor (verse 17). God’s permission is an indirect revelation.

God’s testimony (verse 17)

Paul has characterized the living God as the Creator (verse 15d) and as the God that holds dominion over the people and a claim on them and who withholds his judgment. Verse 17 is the third characteristic of the living God. God has leaved testimony about himself by doing good. Here, Paul places the responsibility for the idolatry with the people.³⁰ God has allowed the idolatry, but that occurred despite God leaving testimony about himself. Paul refers to one side of God’s revelation, which consists of him doing good; he does good by providing rain, i.e. fertile times (cf. Leviticus 26:4; Psalms 147:8-9 and Jeremiah 5:24). This means that God fills their hearts with food, i.e. joy (cf. Psalms 145:15-17).³¹ The testimony is a revelation.³² It takes place through the works of God outside of mankind (the changing seasons) and within mankind (food and joy).³³ The reality and clarity of the testimony are given with the changing of the seasons and the provided food and joy. Paul does not speak explicitly about the people receiving this testimony and knowing God as he reveals himself, but the relationship between verses 16 and 17 and the actual formulation of the testimony in verse 17 can only be interpreted in terms of the people knowing God through his testimony about himself. The people live in the midst of the changing seasons and they have their fill of food and joy. God’s testimony is their reality. The testimony is a known and received revelation.

Paul identifies the living God as the God that steers the changing of the seasons and provides food and joy. The living God is the good God, who takes care of mankind, fulfilling their basic needs for food and joy³⁴ and claims the life and existence of humankind.³⁵ The living God is

³⁰ The concessive *καίτοι* places verse 17 in relation to verse 16. It makes no sense to place verse 17 in relation to verse 15d.

³¹ *καὶ εὐφροσύνης* explicatively states “food”: Food means joy of the heart.

³² Paul preaches one side of the natural revelation, i.e. that God provides the rain and fruitful times; it is possible that Paul re-reveals this because the population in Lystra worship Zeus as the god of the weather, rain and vegetation (see Breytenbach, *Zeus*, pp. 407-409).

³³ Cf. Lerle, *Predigt*, p. 54. Fournier, *Episode*, p. 194, writes: “In other words, Paul is trying to appeal to the God of natural revelation experienced by human beings in their own heart as well as in nature.”

³⁴ Cf. Winter, *Public*, p. 130.

³⁵ This element is included, as verse 17 is tied together with verse 16 and describes how the people worshipped their idols despite the testimony of God.

actively present in the growth in the fields, through the provision of food and joy and in the claim. In as much as the acts of God are a testimony of himself, he is revealed as existing, creating, benevolent and demanding. In the third part of the explication of “the living God”, Paul draws a connection to natural revelation. He re-reveals part of natural revelation.

The Lycaonians’ religious worldview with its polytheism is the second challenge, Paul meets. In verses 15cd-17, he preaches a different religious worldview. Two religious worldviews meet: the one polytheistic and the other monotheistic.³⁶ Two religious histories clash with one another: an illusory story with empty gods and contrived blessings as opposed to their genuine story with God and genuine blessings. A dedicated story vs. a rejected story. Religious manifestations such as sacrifices and the worship of Zeus and Hermes clash with the call to conversion. The break between the two religious worldviews is clearly manifested in Paul’s teaching. In his speech, Paul reveals that the Lycaonians’ real story is with the living God, who is their creator; has put up with their worship of false idols; and is their true benefactor. But he does not expand God’s story with the Lycaonians so as to include the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

The speech in Lystra ends here, and Luke tells (verse 18) of how the apostles were thus able to stop the crowd and prevent them from making sacrifices to them. The context (see especially verses 13 and 18) tells of how the intention of the speech is to prevent this sacrifice to the apostles. This intention explains why Paul stops at this point in his speech. He has reached his objective once he has convinced the crowd that he and Barnabas are humans just like themselves, and he has proclaimed that they are to honor and worship the living God. The speech therefore ends here without any proclamation of Christ; but this is due to the unique context and intention of this address.

3. Contextualization

The message in Lystra offers an example of a contextualization of the gospel. Paul meets the local population – most likely a rural population – and preaches to the people about an element of the good news.

1) Paul contextualizes by linking to natural revelation. He re-reveals part of the natural revelation and proclaims that God is

- the living God, i.e. existing, creating and active
- the creator, who has created heaven and earth
- Lord over the people with power and claim on the people

³⁶ Flemming, *Contextualization*, p. 67.

- tolerant and withholds his judgment (indirectly)
- the good benefactor, who provides life (food) and joy

On the one hand, Paul proclaims the transcendent God, who stands over the creation, as creator and sustainer and as Lord and benefactor. God is separated from the world. On the other hand, Paul speaks of the present, attentive God, who is actively present in the created world in granting permission to allow them to go their own way and in the changing seasons and in food and joy. God is in the world in his works. He is revealed through them. In the proclamation of the living God, Paul draws associations to natural revelation. It is dismissed by the people. They worshipped the empty gods instead of the living God. Paul therefore re-reveals elements in natural revelation.

a) Paul refers to the natural revelation of God, because it is the Lycaonian revelation of God. They are not aware of God's special revelation. But they are familiar with the revelation of the living God in creation, permission (indirect) and the changing seasons and have knowledge of God, but they have repressed this knowledge. They have rejected God. Paul re-reveals the natural revelation in order to give it strength and power in the hope that the message could clear the path through rejection and idolatry.

b) Paul draws a connection to the natural revelation of God on account of the Lycaonians' polytheism. They worship many gods, and Paul must therefore proclaim the existence of only one living God. A true monotheistic perception of God is the basis and condition for being able to teach about Jesus Christ.

c) Paul draws a connection to the natural revelation of God in order to identify the living God for the Lycaonians. He is the creator, the Lord and benefactor of all creation. This identification justifies the call to turn to him; a call based on the character of God.³⁷

d) Paul draws a connection to the natural revelation of God in order to reveal the history of God with the Lycaonians. In his teaching to the Jews and the God-fearers, Paul makes references to the history of God with Israel. He does not do so here; instead, Paul draws associations to God's history with the people, as he preaches about the living God, their creator and Lord, who has displayed tolerance by withholding judgment and has shown and shows them his goodness through the changing of the seasons, food and joy. The living God is their God. The purpose behind this revelation is to draw the listeners into God's story so that they are able to see themselves as part of it. Paul's teachings provide them with the necessary interpretive framework to understand their existence as divine creations owing their existence to God and to understand their

³⁷ Hansen, *Preaching*, p. 315.

experiences (seasons, food and joy) as manifestations of God's care. Paul weaves their lives and experiences into the greater story, with God as creator, Lord and benefactor.³⁸ Through God's history with them, they become able to see who God is and who they are themselves.

2) Paul contextualizes this element of the preaching of the gospel by referring to concrete aspects of the lives of the rural people. Paul speaks of rain and fertile times; about food and the joy over food. This is easily understood by rural people.

3) Paul contextualizes this element of the gospel by making specific reference to their religious beliefs. For the Lycaonians, Zeus was the god of weather, rain and vegetation. He provided the rain and fertile times. He provided the food. Here, Paul is contextualizing and teaching: it is not Zeus, but rather the living God who provides rain and fertile times. It is not Zeus but rather the living God who provides growth, harvest and joy over food.

4) Paul contextualizes this element of the teaching of the gospel by referring to their polytheistic beliefs and calling them to convert from their idols to the living God. This includes a clear element of confrontation. Their gods are empty. The living God is their creator and true benefactor. In this confrontation, there is no identification of Zeus with the living God. Paul does not say anything about them actually worshipping the living God through Zeus or that they have a living connection to the living God through Zeus.

4. The perspective on the revelation

In the message in Lystra, Paul teaches a number of elements of natural revelation. This revelation is not understood as proof of the existence of God, whereby man can use his sense of reason to make a deduction from the creation or the order and beauty of the creation to the existence of God. There is no trace of such thought in this speech. We seek in vain for logical argument or deductive reasoning. The natural revelation is *revelation*, as God reveals himself and some of his attributes through his activities. The acts of God *are* revelation. The natural revelation is a reality and not a hypothetical revelation (verse 15b and 17). In the message in Lystra, Paul proclaims a revelation of God. As already mentioned, I use "revelation" in the objective sense,³⁹ and "revelation" refers to God revealing himself in creation and in the changing of the seasons, in food and in the hearts of man. It is implicit that the people have knowledge ~~of~~ ~~of~~ God, in as much as he has revealed himself as creator, Lord, and the tolerant (indirectly) and as the good benefactor. There is knowledge of God. Paul also teaches that the people have rejected the revelation and knowledge of God. In the speech in Lystra, Paul makes no further mention of what happens in relation to the

³⁸ Cf. Hinkle, *Mission*, p. 96.

³⁹ See note 1.

knowledge of God after people have rejected him and become involved in idolatry. But in as much as Paul emphasizes the “presenting” character of the testimony, both as revelation and as knowledge (note the use of “you” and “your hearts” in verse 17) and the character of testimony, after they have rejected it, it is not possible to speak of a lost revelation or lost knowledge. The knowledge is repressed.⁴⁰

Fundamentally, we find the same perspective on natural revelation in Romans 1:18-32.⁴¹ Here, Paul describes the existence of a revelation of God. God has revealed himself through his actions (Romans 1:20). Similarly, there is knowledge of God – mankind knows God as he has revealed himself through his works (Romans 1:21). This knowledge is rejected by mankind (Romans 1:21-23) but remains intact – though in repressed form – in mankind (Romans 1:18). Romans 1:18-32 confirms that we can talk of knowledge of God and about the repression of this knowledge in the message in Lystra. In Lystra, Paul teaches that God reveals himself through creation, the changing seasons, through food and joy; this we can use to specify what Paul means when he says that God reveals himself through his works (Romans 1:20). In as much as God reveals himself through the changing seasons and in food and joy, we can use this to supplement the image of God provided in Romans 1:18-32. God also reveals himself as the benefactor of mankind. He displays care, keeps mankind alive and fills hearts with joy. In other words, the Pauline teachings in Lystra provide the same fundamental perspective on natural revelation as in Romans 1:18-32.⁴²

We have seen that the speech in verses 15d-17 is part of the proclamation of the gospel. This means that Paul draws part of the natural revelation into the gospel, thereby confirming the natural revelation. It is somewhat remarkable that Paul uses an OT-quote and several OT phrases when describing the living God in this re-revelation of the natural revelation.⁴³ Paul thus implicitly identifies the living God, who has revealed himself through creation and the changing seasons, though food and joy, with the God who has revealed himself to Israel as the creator;⁴⁴ and as their benefactor with rain and the harvest.⁴⁵ The living God is described in the same manner as he

⁴⁰ Many are of the opinion that Paul, in Romans 1:18-32, describes an original revelation for Adam. The speech in Lystra cannot be understood as a description of such an original revelation; this is rendered impossible due to verses 15d and 17.

⁴¹ This builds on my study: “Natural revelation according to Romans 1:18-2:16” (forthcoming).

⁴² In other words, I completely disagree with Maddox, *Purpose*, p. 68, who writes: “Certainly Paul and Luke use natural theology in quite different ways: Paul to rebuke the Gentile world for its idolatry, since it could have known the true God through creation and reason, Luke to suggest a *praeparatio evangelica*.”

⁴³ εὐαγγελίζειν, τῶν ματαίων, ἐπιστρέφειν can be mentioned together with the quote from Exodus 20:11, which describes the living God as the creator.

⁴⁴ See the quote from Exodus 20:11 in verse 15.

⁴⁵ God provides the rain and the harvest (see Leviticus 26:4, Jeremiah 5:24 and Psalm 147:8), and Psalm 145:15-16 describes God as providing food at the proper time and satisfying the desires of every living thing.

has revealed himself for Israel via the prophets. In this manner, Paul builds an implicit bridge to the OT as a revelation of God.⁴⁶

5. The perspective on the idols

The perspective on the idols in particular has often led some to argue that there is opposition between the message in Lystra and Romans 1:18-32.⁴⁷ However, this opposition first emerges when one interprets “the permission” in verse 16 as expression of a mild and tolerant perspective on idolatry.⁴⁸ This stands in contrast to Paul’s judgment over the idolatry in Romans 1. As we have seen, however, this interpretation of the speech in Lystra does not stand. Idolatry is not preparation for the gospel, as the people are worshipping empty gods in rebellion against God. In as much as there is an accessible revelation of God, and in as much as the Lycaonians have knowledge of God, worshipping the empty idols can only be understood as a rejection of God. The idols are substitutes for God, and the idolatry is instead of honoring and worshipping the living God. Judgment is therefore also passed on their idolatry in the call to conversion. This corresponds to the view on idolatry in Romans 1:18-32. According to Romans 1:21-23, mankind rejects God in the sense that they have known God through his works and they replace God with idols. Beneath the idolatry is a sense of rebellion against God.

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⁴⁶ Cf. Bechard, *Paul*, p. 426: “The one proclaimed by the people of Israel as ‘the creator of the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them’ is here identified with the God known to the Lycaonians in prior acts of self-disclosure”. Bechard is referring here to verse 17a.

⁴⁷ This builds on my study: “Natural revelation according to Romans 1:18-2:16” (forthcoming).

⁴⁸ Fournier, *Episode*, pp. 164-165+195, is of the opinion that the religiosity of the Lycaonians is a “recognition of divinity”. The Lycaonians experience God, and Paul can appeal directly to how the listeners experience God in nature and their hearts (Fournier, *Episode*, p. 194). Fournier concludes that: “But while demanding that the pagans abandon one of the ways of past generations, that is, sacrificing to vain idols, Paul does not condemn them since he affirms that God “allowed all the nations to follow their own ways” (Acts 14:16). In fact, this last expression denotes a positive presence of God in the history of the Lystrans. Paul’s message concerning the living God appears to be in continuity with the religious experience of the nations who do recognize some form of divinity. However, to turn to the living God demands an inevitable break with that dimension of the past religious experience including worship of idols. The assumption here is that “the time of ethnic permissiveness in religion, a time of ignorance and trust in ‘vain things’, is drawing to a close.” Concretely, this means abstaining from offering sacrifices or from idolatry. The quote in the reference is from Tannehill, *Unity*, p. 179.

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