

## The speech on the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31)

In Romans 1:18-2:16, Paul teaches about natural revelation.<sup>1</sup> In two speeches to the Gentiles in Lystra (Acts 14) and on the Areopagus (Acts 17), Paul refers to natural revelation. It is therefore interesting to examine Paul's use of natural revelation in the two speeches and compare them with Romans 1-2. Here, we will examine the speech on the Areopagus.

### 1. Introduction

Luke recounts Paul's time in Athens. While waiting for Silas and Timothy, Paul studies the city more closely. Luke describes his reaction to what he sees in Athens. "He was greatly distressed" when he sees that the city is full of idols (κατείδωλον; verse 16).<sup>2</sup> Paul is distressed over the extent of their idolatry.<sup>3</sup> Here is an initial characterization of the religiosity of the Athenians. Their worship is idolatry, and the number of idols tells of the extent of the Athenians' alienation from the true God.<sup>4</sup> Luke tells of how Paul has conversations in the synagogue with Jews and the God-fearers and that he speaks with those who pass through the market-place (verse 17). We hear that there are also Epicurean and Stoic philosophers present, and we hear their response. Some of them believe he is babbling. Paul's teachings are met with mockery and ridicule. The philosophers thus display their fundamental lack of understanding. Others believe that Paul is proclaiming foreign gods (ξένων δαιμονίων). The characterization "foreign gods" reveals that these persons did not know Jesus. He is not a part of their existing religiosity; neither in revealed or concealed form. They defend the "foreign gods" message on the grounds that Paul is preaching the gospel about Jesus and the resurrection. They understand "Jesus" and "Anastasis" as gods. These Athenians acknowledge that Paul's teaching is something new, and they attempt to understand the new and unknown on the basis of their polytheistic framework of understanding.<sup>5</sup> Their pantheon is open. Jesus is interpreted as a divine person. The resurrection of Christ is interpreted as the name of another divine person (a woman) or as an abstraction. This interpretation reveals their polytheistic understanding of the divine and thus reveals their ignorance of the true God. Their mockery and

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<sup>1</sup> Because it is ambiguous, I do not use the term "natural theology"; instead, I use two other terms: Natural revelation, where "revelation" is to be understood in the objective sense as referring to God having revealed himself in creation, man and history. When speaking of "revelation", I am thinking exclusively of the objective side 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, man and history.

<sup>2</sup> Part c. θεωροῦντος has causal significance.

<sup>3</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 204, writes on verse 16: "This note of the spiritual condition of the city sets the stage and tone for Paul's ministry and speech: The Athenians continually failed to realise the worthlessness of their idols and their worship and had not found the true God."

<sup>5</sup> Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 206: "Their attempt to understand this new proclamation consisted of its interpretation within their existing pagan framework."

interpretation of “Jesus” and “the resurrection” neutralizes Paul’s message. “Jesus and the resurrection” is a precise summary of Paul’s preaching, which indicates that Paul has preached the same gospel in Athens and to the philosophers as in all other places (13:16ff; 17:1-4 and 20:21 and cf. 1:8 and 4:12). The Epicureans and Stoics take Paul with them to the Areopagus (verses 18-21) because Paul is teaching something new and strange (verses 19-20). This characterization again reveals that Paul is teaching something new.

In the Areopagus,<sup>6</sup> Paul is asked to explain his new teaching (verses 19-20).<sup>7</sup> He holds a speech (verse 22-31), in which he defends himself against charges of proclaiming foreign gods and spreading new teaching. Paul will not introduce a new God; because they basically already know him. He has revealed himself to them; he is already here; he is not far away from any one of them (verse 27); and they live, move and have their being in him (verse 28). But the Athenians have rejected God. This reveals their idolatry. But Paul now proclaims this “known but unknown” God to them. The unique form and content of the speech is owing to this special occasion.

## **2. Two characteristic interpretations of the speech**

Before analyzing the speech, I wish to mention two characteristic interpretations. There are two typical interpretations of the speech on the Areopagus.

1) A philosophical interpretation. The most well known philosophical interpretation of the speech on the Areopagus has been written by Dibelius. Dibelius himself uses the word “philosophical” when referring to his own interpretation. Dibelius believes that “an interpretation of the speech in the Areopagus must begin with the second theme, vv. 26, 27.”<sup>8</sup> He rejects that Paul thinks<sup>9</sup> “historically in the sense of the Old Testament.” Paul thinks “hellenistically in the sense of the philosophy of the Enlightenment.” Paul therefore refers to “the whole human race.”<sup>10</sup> “The appointed *καίροι* are naturally the seasons.” “Bounds of their habitation” refers to zones, which “are fit for habitation.” “In the teaching about zones, which was current from earliest times in Greek science, it is always emphasised that, out of the five zones, only two are fit for human habitation.”<sup>11</sup> “It is observed gratefully and to the praise of the deity that both the zones which are inhabited by human beings ... differ favourably from the tropical and the two arctic zones. In this sense Cicero

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<sup>6</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 8-10; Winter, *Gods*, p. 83, characterizes the meeting as “an initial meeting of Council members with Paul.”

<sup>7</sup> Schnabel, *Mission*, p. 1394.

<sup>8</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> In the following discussion, I use “Paul” to refer to the person who has spoken on the Areopagus. Dibelius uses the phrase “the speaker of Areopagus.”

<sup>10</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 30-31.

propounded the idea of the zones of human habitation as being evidence in the proof of God...”<sup>12</sup> Dibelius finds the decisive argument for the philosophical interpretation in God’s purpose behind determining the times and zones for habitation (verse 26). The purpose is that they ought to seek God (verse 27). In the OT, seeking God is a matter of the will. In the Areopagus Speech, however, the search for God is “a matter of thinking. Through the familiar and accessible manifestations of life God has revealed himself to men (...) to such an extent that they observe his existence and draw the corresponding conclusions. Here, it is not a question of putting one’s trust in God or submitting oneself in obedience to him; the aim here is that he should be apprehended because the world is apprehended.”<sup>13</sup> “It is, however, only the philosophical and not the historical interpretation of the motif which gives rise to this understanding of the words, for the political boundaries, which would be important for the historical explanation, are no evidence of the existence of God. The intentional grouping of people upon the habitable surfaces of the earth is, however, proof of the existence of Providence.”<sup>14</sup> God’s arrangement – with the seasons and the division of the earth in habitable and uninhabitable zones – offers proof of the existence of God. The purpose of this division in seasons and zones is that the people are supposed to seek God. In the philosophical interpretation, there is talk of “the cosmopolitan human race.”<sup>15</sup> Dibelius believes that the first theme in the speech (verses 24-25) is “intended to convey a hellenistic doctrine of God”. This is because “God’s freedom from need” is well known in Hellenism but foreign from the NT, and there is no emphasis on this in the GT.<sup>16</sup>

The third theme is found in verses 28-29. Dibelius writes: “So much material on this subject has been collected in the discussion of the last twenty-five years that the purely hellenistic character of this theme is obvious.”<sup>17</sup> Here, Paul says “that we are related to God. Thus, ἐν αὐτῷ is at least to be taken as implying a certain panentheism.”<sup>18</sup> Dibelius believes that Paul is quoting two poets. “Thus the speaker on the Areopagus seems to have stated the theme of God’s natural relationship with men by means of two quotations from the poets.”<sup>19</sup> The theme in verses 28-29 is “the nearness of God to men, man’s relatedness to God.” Dibelius expounds upon the latter when he writes: “since we are now of his family, that is, after all that has been said, we are of his nature and

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<sup>12</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 33-37.

<sup>16</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 41-46.

<sup>17</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 50.

bound to him.”<sup>20</sup> The conclusion is that: “... then we can only conclude that the Areopagus speech is a hellenistic speech with a Christian ending; its theme is knowledge of God, to which every human being can attain, since man’s own position in the world and the affinity of his nature with God’s inevitably lead him there.”<sup>21</sup>

Dibelius writes about two proofs of the existence of God in the speech on the Areopagus. “The Areopagus speech shows a different conception of the Stoic proof of God; it is the teleological rather than the cosmological proof which stands foremost. By his intentional provision for men God has himself to some extent challenged them to seek him. Thus it happens that they honour him without knowing him by actual revelation.” “According to the speech, this knowledge leads to man’s ‘feeling after’ and honouring the God he believes must exist.”<sup>22</sup> The second proof of the existence of God is found in the relationship between mankind and God. “The second evidence of natural man’s knowledge of God is provided in the Areopagus speech by man’s relationship to God.”<sup>23</sup> Dibelius can also use the word “proof” in this regard.<sup>24</sup> Dibelius has used a number of themes in order to describe the relationship between man and God. He writes that “we are related to God” (p. 47), “a certain panentheism” (p. 47), “God’s natural relationship with men” (p. 50), “God’s relationship with men” (p. 52), “a particularly close connection with God” (p. 52), “his family” (p. 54), “we are of his nature and bound to him” (p. 54), “man’s relationship with God” (p. 60). Dibelius specifies the array of different expressions for this relationship when drawing comparisons with Paul. This relationship is to be understood as “communion with God”, which has the same meaning as the believers’ “communion with Christ” in the Pauline letters.<sup>25</sup> This “communion with God” means that man is not “estranged from God” because of sin; that man is not “at enmity with God”; and does not need “reconciliation with God.” “Paul would never ascribe even to Christians as direct a relationship with God as the speaker on Areopagus ascribes to men generally.”<sup>26</sup>

Dibelius’ interpretation is an example of a philosophical (i.e. primarily Stoic) interpretation of the speech on the Areopagus. Methodically it is flawed, as Dibelius isolates verses 26-27 and begins the interpretation of the speeches there. Dibelius applies a philosophical interpretation of verses 26-27 which is not possible. Next, Dibelius develops his philosophical

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<sup>20</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 60.

<sup>26</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 61.

interpretation in relation to the other verses. But as the point of departure in verses 26-27 is flawed, this interpretation of the other verses does not hold (verses 24-25 and 28-29, respectively). Nor does Dibelius manage to anchor the speech in its historical context. In Dibelius' interpretation, the speech outlines how mankind is of God in being and nature; that mankind is in God; and stands in a close relationship with God. God's division of the seasons and habitable and uninhabitable zones together with the relationship between God and mankind offer two proofs of God's existence that provide mankind with a natural knowledge of God. This leads man to grope after and honor this God, who he believes must exist. The theme is knowledge of God. Any and every person is capable of attaining this knowledge. Every person possesses this knowledge by virtue of their nature. Dibelius understands this knowledge in purely cognitive terms. Seeking God is cognitively understood. Conversion is "recalling that knowledge of God which, by virtue of his nature, belongs to man."<sup>27</sup> Conversion is cognitive. Ignorance is cognitively understood. Ignorant times are therefore "the times when men certainly possessed the natural knowledge of God but allowed it to lead them only to honour the unknown god."<sup>28</sup> The problem with idolatry is also cognitive, as Paul speaks "as one who is enlightening them in their ignorance."<sup>29</sup> The difference between then and now is cognitively understood as a difference in terms of "ignorance and knowledge." The two greatest problems in Dibelius' interpretation are that he is writing about proofs of God, even though there is no trace of this in the text, as Paul describes revelation, and that he writes about the close relationship between mankind and God even though the speech emphasizes the distance between mankind and God in idolatry and the call to conversion.<sup>30</sup>

2) An OT-Jewish interpretation. The most well-known OT-Jewish interpretation of the speech on the Areopagus has been written by Gärtner.<sup>31</sup> He believes that "the Areopagus speech was only laying the foundations of the Christian message to the Gentiles." It is therefore "the first

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<sup>27</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 62.

<sup>29</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> A more recent example of a philosophical interpretation is found in Balch, *Speech*, p. 52-79; Balch writes on p. 53: "In this chapter I argue that Posidonian texts clarify four aspects of the Areopagus address because they are related to contemporary philosophical debates – debates concerning providence in nature, debates concerning providence in history, and debates concerning whether or not the divine is to be worshipped by images in temples. Fourth ... I will discuss the analogy of Dio Chrysostom *Olympic Oration* 12, a Stoic speech influenced by the Stoic Posidonius on the topic of our 'sources for the knowledge of God'." As we will see, the first point in Balch is based on a flawed interpretation of verse 26. Balch believes that it is about the limits for the inhabitable zones. In the second point, the comparison does not hold, as Posidonius comments that "the providential consequences are immanent" (p. 67), while Acts 17:31 describes God's eschatological judgment. With respect to the third point (criticism a worship of images), there is similarity, but with respect to the fourth point, Dio Chrysostom and Paul operate in the speech on the Areopagus with entirely different sources for knowledge about God. Thus, Balch's thesis falls.

<sup>31</sup> This type of interpretation is often referred to as "historical" as opposed to "philosophical".

steps in the preaching to the Gentiles, consisting in a criticism of the false knowledge of God and its resultant worship of idols.”<sup>32</sup> Gärtner rejects that “the reference to the nature” is “an argument for the existence of God.” “There is ... not a single word in the speech to suggest any intention of proving God’s existence.” “The reference to nature” is to be understood as a revelation. “The revelations of God’s nature to which the Areopagus speech refers are those which are evidenced in the creation, in God’s maintenance of His creation, in the life of the nations, and in man’s complete dependence of the ‘life-giving’ God.”<sup>33</sup> This interpretation “is a link in the attack on the false conception of God which had led to idolatry, an attack which persists throughout the speech.” The purpose of this revelation “is to introduce the audience to the living God, His omnipotence and glory, and thus open their eyes to the error and emptiness of their religion.”<sup>34</sup> Gärtner writes about three aspects of “the universal revelations.”<sup>35</sup>

1) God reveals himself in nature. “The first feature in the picture of God represented by the Areopagus speech is God as the Creator” (verses 24 and 26). “Here, Paul is proclaiming the Creator-God familiar from Genesis.”<sup>36</sup> “God is not only He Who has created the world and all that is therein, the speech continues; He also preserves His Creation. The Creator is κύριος above heaven and earth. This means that it is God Who has dominion over the world, is its Ruler. His rule is manifested in two ways: one is the creation of the world, and the other His activity in preserving this same created world.” “God’s preserving function in the creation has plain Old Testament parallels.”<sup>37</sup>

2) God also reveals himself in history. “God has created the nations to inhabit the whole earth, and He has appointed times for the life of the nations and set bounds to their habitations. This testifies that God is the living God Who determines the destinies of the nations.”<sup>38</sup> In connection with verse 26, Gärtner writes that “both language and content exclude any argument for God’s existence here; what we have is a reference to the revelation of God provided in the life of the nations.”<sup>39</sup> This is an OT-Jewish understanding.<sup>40</sup> God’s activity in history “is revelational in character, and testifies that He is the One acting God.”<sup>41</sup> Until this point in the speech, the speech

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<sup>32</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 145.

<sup>33</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 146.

<sup>34</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 146.

<sup>35</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 179.

<sup>36</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 171.

<sup>37</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 175.

<sup>38</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 146-147.

<sup>39</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 148.

<sup>40</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 148-151.

<sup>41</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 152.

has an OT-Jewish background; but the question is whether it shifts in verses 27-28 and should now be read on the background of Stoic philosophy, in particular.<sup>42</sup> However, Gärtner rejects that “the idea that God created man to seek Him” should “indicate an innate urge in man to seek to know God’s Being from his knowledge of the world.”<sup>43</sup> He rejects the notion “that part of the Divine *Logos* is inherent in man, that he is impelled by an inward urge to seek God, and that this urge is developed in contemplation of his own nature and the world.”<sup>44</sup> “To seek God” is “to serve and obey Him and praise His name.”<sup>45</sup> The sentence “if haply they might grope after Him and find Him” formulates a “hypothetical case”.<sup>46</sup> “Paul is saying that man is created with the appointed purpose to seek God; but the uncertainty of this quest is nevertheless variously indicated.”<sup>47</sup>

3) God reveals himself in the dependency of mankind upon him. “The words on the nearness of God open up a third sphere within which a certain revelation of God is to be found. The clause ‘He is not far from every one of us’ is primarily complementing the earlier statement about man’s seeking Him, and is intended to stress how near, how perceptible is the revelation of God to the man who desires to know and worship the One God.” That mankind is “wholly dependent on Him for their existence ... constitutes a revelation that all can understand, a revelation of God’s life-giving Being.”<sup>48</sup> The clause “for in him we live...demonstrates man’s absolute dependence on God”, and “this dependence forms the third aspect of the universal revelations advanced by Paul.”<sup>49</sup> Paul uses the quote from Aratus to formulate the similarity between God and man, “and this likeness refers to life.”<sup>50</sup>

According to Gärtner, “There is one theme in the speech which runs through it all, and which must not be lost sight of: namely, the attack on the false worship of God.”<sup>51</sup> Paul attacks “the temple services and sacrifices”; he attacks “the idols.” “God is the veritable living God. Man, who is the highest living being on earth, is wholly dependent on God for existence. Being the highest ‘function of life’ on earth, he is akin to God. As a deduction from this, the speech points out that all images, indeed, anything at all that belongs to the created world, or that has been contrived by man,

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<sup>42</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 177-178.

<sup>43</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 152.

<sup>44</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 153.

<sup>45</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 153.

<sup>46</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 158-159.

<sup>47</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 161.

<sup>48</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 178.

<sup>49</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 179.

<sup>50</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 193.

<sup>51</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 203.

cannot be God.”<sup>52</sup> Towards the end of the speech, Paul uses ignorance (ἄγνοια) “to characterise epochs of human history that lie outside the revelation of Christ.”<sup>53</sup> “God’s attitude to man’s ignorance during this period is one of forbearance (ὑπεριδεῖν) which here most nearly means that God does not intervene to change the situation.”<sup>54</sup> But with “the advent of the revelation of Christ, a new age has begun.”<sup>55</sup> “The former epoch is thereby brought to judgment, and the only possibility of salvation is to turn from the old to the new age, μετανοεῖν.”<sup>56</sup>

It is characteristic for Gärtner that he understands the speech on the Areopagus on the basis of an OT-Jewish background. He rejects the notion that the speech is to be understood philosophically, i.e. Stoically. Four things are typical for Gärtner’s interpretation. 1) Gärtner writes about revelation, and that God reveals himself in three ways: a) through creation and maintenance, b) through history and c) through the dependence of mankind upon God. He correctly rejects the notion that it is possible to find logical conclusions that can prove the existence of God. 2) Gärtner finds an OT-Jewish understanding of God in the speech – not a philosophical-Stoic understanding. God is theistic, -transcendental, understood as creator, Lord of life and history and giver of life. 3) Gärtner finds that the seeking of man after God is doubtful, and he rejects that it is possible to find traces of an implanted drive towards God in the speech, as the stoics teach. 4) The speech constitutes an attack on idolatry and its perception of gods, temples as the residences of gods, sacrifices and idols. With this revelation of God and this attack, Paul lays the foundation for a proclamation of the gospel. Fundamentally, I agree with Gärtner’s interpretation, as will become apparent in the following.

### **3. The introduction to the speech (verses 22-23)**

I have referred to two characteristic interpretations and will now proceed to analyze the speech. In the introduction, Paul refers to the religiosity of the Athenians and the extent of this religiosity (“in everything”), which he bases on the fact that among their shrines,<sup>57</sup> he found an altar to an unknown god.<sup>58</sup> The perspective on the religiosity of the Athenians determines the perspective on this address. In the context (verses 16-21), Luke has recounted Paul’s negative reaction towards the Athenians’ idolatry (verse 16). The mockery of the philosophers, attempts at integrating “Jesus” and “the resurrection” in their polytheistic understanding of the divine and their talk of something new

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<sup>52</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 222.

<sup>53</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 229.

<sup>54</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 230.

<sup>55</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 230.

<sup>56</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 233.

<sup>57</sup> σεβάσματα can mean “object of worship”, i.e. idol or “shrine”.

<sup>58</sup> As regards the question about the existence of such an altar, see Hemer, *Speeches*, p. 241 note 12.



reveals their distance to the gospel. This casts a negative light on their religiosity. In the speech on the Areopagus (verses 22-31), Paul also formulates a negative view on the Athenians' religiosity. He refers to their ignorance, their flawed understanding of the divine as regards housing, needs and nature, and he dismisses their religiosity and calls them to convert. In the conclusion (verses 32-34), we hear about both derision and openness, where the derision again reveals the distance between the Athenians and Paul's teaching. On that background, Paul's address represents an observation: the Athenians are religious, and they are religious in everything. But their religiosity is false.<sup>59</sup>

Paul refers to an altar with the inscription: "To an unknown god". Paul recounts how he found this altar among their idols. On that background, "an unknown god" is understood polytheistically. This is a cultic place among other cultic places, one god among many; though this god is unknown. The altar to "an unknown god" is evidence of an open pantheon. The Athenians have feared that their collection of gods has been incomplete. It was possible that gods existed that they ought to be worshipping but which they were not familiar with. In this sense, the altar to "an unknown god" represents an attempt at hedging themselves against the existence of unknown gods. Alternatively, the altar could offer evidence that the Athenians have experienced divine help without being certain as to which god had intervened. In this case, one could make sacrifices to this one specific but unknown god at this altar. In any case, the altar to "an unknown god" is indicative of an open pantheon.<sup>60</sup>

Paul uses the inscription on the altar to introduce his speech. It provides a "text" that he can use as the point of departure for his address. It is obvious that the altar and its inscription are the point of reference. Conversely, the more specific understanding of this point of reference is one of the most controversial elements as regards the interpretation of the speech. The following possibilities exist.

1) Paul identifies the unknown god with God, the creator of the earth and the Lord of the heavens and the earth.<sup>61</sup> The unknown god is understood in polytheistic terms as a specific god

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<sup>59</sup> It is therefore incorrect to characterize verses 22-23 as a "captatio benevolentiae" and write that Paul's "rebuke of their idolatry and polytheism is relatively mild" (as does Wilson, *Gentiles*, p. 197).

<sup>60</sup> See Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 13.

<sup>61</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 41, writes: "...he regarded the inscription as evidence of the Athenians' subconscious awareness of the true God." Mosbech, *Apostlenes Gerninger*, p. 204, writes (own translation): "Paul believes that he can make a proclamation to them about this God, who the Gentiles could sense." Wilson, *Mission*, p. 214, writes: "For whereas Paul claims that the Gentiles knew God but did not honour him, Luke claims that they worship God but did not know him. The one view emphasises the Gentiles' culpability, while the other interprets their basic response as correct but misguided." Winter, *Gods*, p. 84, writes about Paul: "He was not technically heralding new divinities to Athens. Rather he was declaring the nature of the divinity whom they had already honoured or worshipped (εὐσεβείτε)." Barrett, *Acts II*, p. 838-839 writes: The Athenians reverence a certain object, Paul proclaims it." "Paul declares: You are

among other gods in the Greek pantheon. The unknown god is a god that lives in temples, requires sacrifices and which can be produced in gold, silver or stone and be equated with this image. In contrast to their other gods, the unknown god is unknown, and the Athenians cannot attach a name, face or function(s) to this god or produce it in material form. But Paul now identifies this one unknown god as being God. These Athenians have been worshipping God in the form of the unknown god – albeit without knowing it. But nevertheless!<sup>62</sup> According to this interpretation, ὁ and τοῦτο refer to “an unknown god” (Ἀγνώστῳ θεῷ): “That, (= the unknown god) which you are worshipping without knowing it, this (= the unknown god) is what I proclaim to you”. The problem with their worshipping is cognitive. They are lacking a revelation; which Paul now provides them with. This interpretation is problematic. a) The use of τοῦτο and ὁ do not fit with this interpretation, as the use of the neuter formulates something abstract; not anything personal.<sup>63</sup> This interpretation requires the masculine forms. b) In this context, “an unknown god” is an “idol” among other idols. The wording in verse 23 shows how Paul puts the altar alongside other idols. The unknown god is identified as one of their gods, but Paul proclaims the one and true God. Paul’s understanding of God transcends the polytheistic. c) Worshipping “an unknown god” in a polytheistic context is idolatry.<sup>64</sup> d) The Athenians understanding of the housing, needs and form of the gods does not correspond to Paul’s understanding of God. e) The ignorant times characterize the Athenians’ idolatry and indicate that they do not know God through their idols. f) The call to conversion indicates that there is no link between the unknown god and the one and true God; and that they worship – albeit in ignorance – the one true God in the unknown god. Paul does not acknowledge the worship of this unknown god.<sup>65</sup>

2) Paul understands the inscription on the altar as an admission of their ignorance. The Athenians are aware of the existence of an unknown god, as acknowledged by this altar, and Paul makes reference to this admission of ignorance.<sup>66</sup> This is confirmed later, as Paul applies Ἀγνώστῳ

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religious, but your religion is uninstructed.” Losie, *Speech*, p. 232, writes: “Ironically, the ‘unknown god’ is, in fact, the God who is known.”

<sup>62</sup> Others modify this identification. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 356, writes: “This God whom they worshipped ... was the God whom he now proposed to make known to them. Only, he did not express himself quite so personally, as if unreservedly identifying the ‘unknown god’ of the inscription with the God he proclaimed.” Haenchen, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 501, writes in relation to an unknown God: “Gerade dieser Gott ist der wahre und einzige. Paulus schliesst aus dessen Verehrung, das die Heiden in einem Ja und Nein zugleich zum rechten Gott leben: sie verehren ihn und kennen ihn doch nicht – sie verehren ihn neben vielen anderen!”

<sup>63</sup> Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte II*, p. 238 and Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 136.

<sup>64</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 14-15.

<sup>65</sup> Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 446.

<sup>66</sup> Lenski, *Acts*, p. 723, Conzelmann, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 107 and Schille, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 356, who writes: “Hier dient er allerdings nur zur Überleitung: Was unbekannt ist, muss bekanntgemacht werden.” Schneider,

to their worshipping. They worship the unknown in ignorance. Stonehouse writes: “Paul makes the most of their public profession of lack of knowledge concerning the objects of worship by virtually reading it back to them as a characterization of their religion.”<sup>67</sup> Stonehouse continues: “The ignorance rather than the worship is thus underscored, and Paul is indicating that he will inform them with regard to that concerning which they acknowledge ignorance.” There are two problems with this interpretation. The first problem is that generalizations are drawn from this inscription and subsequently interpreted as representing something more general about the Athenians’ religion. But there is no basis for doing so. They are merely ignorant of this one unknown god. The second problem is that Paul actually ties a connection between this unknown god and the one true God. This formulation indicates that Paul – somehow or another – identifies and reveals an unknown God for them. This is ignored in this interpretation.

3) There is talk of a functional – not personal – identification. Marshall writes: “There was, to be sure, no real connection between “an unknown god” and the true God; Paul hardly meant that his audience were unconscious worshippers of the true God. Rather, he is drawing their attention to the true God who was ultimately responsible for the phenomena which they attributed to an unknown god.”<sup>68</sup> The text includes a link between “an unknown god” and “God” – not a convergence between functions.

4) Paul makes reference to the category “an unknown god”, but he loosens “this unknown god” from the Athenians’ fundamental understanding with respect to the personal, polytheistic and material aspects.<sup>69</sup> a) The Athenians understand “an unknown god” personally. Paul loosens “an unknown god” from this personal understanding and speaks impersonally about this god. “This” is not a person; rather, it is something abstract. “This” is not concrete, but rather a term. “This” is not local, but rather a category. “This” becomes “it” in Paul’s usage. b) The Athenians understand “an unknown god” as one god among others. Paul loosens “an unknown god” from the polytheistic Athenian understanding and uses the abstract term “an unknown god” monotheistically. “This” (the category “an unknown god”) becomes identified with the one true God in Paul’s proclamation. c) The Athenians understand “an unknown god” materialistically, such

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*Apostelgeschichte II*, p. 238: “Die Rede geht freilich nicht von der Ansicht aus, die heidnischen Athener hätten diesen personalen wahren Gott schon ‘unwissend verehrt’.” Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte II*, p. 136, Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 446 and Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 212-213, emphasize the element of ignorance.

<sup>67</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 19.

<sup>68</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, p. 286.

<sup>69</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 238, writes: “It seems most correct in this case, however, to make a distinction between the ideas governing those who erected and used the altar, and the sense that Paul puts on the inscription. It would be quite in keeping with Paul’s method of using quotations for him to use the altar inscription in a way that suits his message.”

that this god – just like the other gods – lives in temples, requires sacrifices and can be produced in material form. Paul loosens “an unknown god” from these conceptions, as he proclaims that this unknown god does not live in temples, does not require anything and cannot be produced in material form. Paul thus loosens “an unknown god” from the Athenians’ polytheistic and materialistic conceptions: “That, which (i.e. the unknown god as category) you worship in ignorance, this (the unknown god as category) I proclaim to you.”

When Paul uses this altar and its inscription as the basis for his speech and thus identifies the abstract category, “an unknown God”, with the true God, who is creator and Lord, he is proclaiming to them that they are ignorant of the true God *in their worship*. Later in the speech, it becomes clear that God has revealed himself to the Athenians and that they know God; but not in their worship.

Paul talks of the Athenians worshipping this unknown god in an ignorant manner. With “as you are ignorant” (ἀγνοοῦτε), Paul also separates the worship of the one and true God from their worship of an unknown god. With “ignorant”, the idea is that the Athenians worship this unknown god as a polytheistic god via this altar and via sacrifices.

#### **4. God is the creator and giver of life (verses 24-25)**

Paul has based his speech on the altar with the inscription “to an unknown god”. He uses this inscription as a catapult, which provides him with a basis to proclaim the one true God. He achieves this by loosening up “an unknown god” from the Athenian’s polytheism and material conceptions and by identifying the one true God in his teachings. This unfolds over four steps. With “I proclaim” (καταγγέλλω), Paul characterizes the following as preaching.

##### **The first step: God as creator and Lord**

In his proclamation, Paul refers to the natural revelation. He includes an element of the natural revelation in his teaching and re-reveals it. Paul first identifies the “unknown God” – loosened from the Athenians’ polytheistic conceptions – with God as creator. Paul now refers to “God” (ὁ θεός) and identifies him more specifically: God has created the world (κόσμον) and everything in it (cf. Es 42:5 and 45:18).<sup>70</sup> After identifying God as the creator, Paul proclaims that God does not live in man-made temples. This is the principal statement in verse 24. Paul defends this with the fact<sup>71</sup> that God is Lord (κύριος) over heaven and earth (cf. Es 42:5 and 45:18).<sup>72</sup> As the creator, God also reveals himself as the lord of mankind; through this revelation, God makes a claim to the obedience

<sup>70</sup> Paul uses “the world” (κόσμον) in reference to the heavens and the earth (see verse 24b).

<sup>71</sup> ὑπάρχων has causal significance.

<sup>72</sup> Wilson, *Gentiles*, p. 199.

of mankind.<sup>73</sup> God living in a temple is to be understood in concrete terms as an imitation of God.<sup>74</sup> God is referred to a place and is tied to specific, man-made buildings. God becomes dependent upon mankind. They have God at their disposal.<sup>75</sup> This is incompatible with God's being and status as Lord. As the creator of everything, his creative power is omnipresent, and as the Lord of the heavens and the earth, his dominion is omnipresent. The presence of God can therefore not be limited to temples (cf. Es 45:18f; 66:1f, John 2:18-22; 4:19-24 and Acts 7:48-49).

Paul teaches that God is the creator; consequently, God is Lord; and as a consequence of this, God does not live in temples. Paul does not explicitly proclaim that the creation reveals God; however, analogous to God's work in history revealing him (see verses 26-27), it is natural that God's actions in creation reveal God. This is confirmed in Acts 14:15-17 and Romans 1:20; Paul re-reveals an element from the natural revelation.

Paul proclaims God as he has revealed himself in creation (natural revelation) and as he has revealed himself in the OT (special revelation). God is identified with the God of the OT. The first identification of the unknown God as Creator and Lord is a step in Paul's criticism of the Athenians' idolatry.<sup>76</sup> Paul proclaims the unknown God. The Athenians' gods can therefore not be identified with this God, and their worship is not the worship of this God. The revelation of God's character forms the basis for a critique of an element in the Athenians' religious perception, i.e. that God lives in man-made temples. This is incompatible with God's character as Lord. In this confrontation and critique, Paul makes references to something that he and the Athenians hold in common: natural revelation. The Athenians are familiar with natural revelation, but they have repressed this knowledge. This is seen in their idolatry.<sup>77</sup>

### **The second step: God as independent of sacrifices and as the giver of life**

Paul continues his proclamation regarding the unknown God. In his teaching, Paul makes references to the natural revelation. He includes an element from natural revelation in his teaching and re-

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<sup>73</sup> This lordship is based on the fact that he is the creator (see Acts 14:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 8:6).

<sup>74</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 209.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. A. Weiser, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 261, quoted in Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 213.

<sup>76</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 22 and Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 203.

<sup>77</sup> Paul advances a temple critique that can be found in the OT and expressed by Jesus and Stephen. Paul's speech is addressed to polytheists; it is not specifically directed towards Stoics or Epicureans. Pohlenz, *Paul*, p. 83 writes about an understanding with the Stoics and that Paul acquires "eine geeignete Plattform, indem er auf ihre denkweise eingeht" in verses 24-25. Pohlenz cites verses 24-25 and adds immediately after the quote: "Das ist, wenn wir von der spezifisch theistischen Färbung absehen, die Paulus dem Satze gibt." Here, however, Pohlenz ignores the introduction to the speech, which tells of how Paul attacks the Athenians' polytheism and that they do not know God in their religiosity. This is therefore also relevant for the Stoics who are present. Winter, *Public*, p. 137, writes about the Epicureans: "Thirdly, there would have been a consensus between Paul and the Epicureans that God does not live in man-made temples."

reveals it. Paul identifies the “unknown God” – loosened from the Athenians’ polytheistic conceptions – as a God who is not served by human hands.<sup>78</sup> This is the main statement in verse 25. In this context, they are thinking about service in the temple (verse 24), and the “by human hands” that follows shows that this refers to sacrifices and physical service of God. With “as though he needs something” (προσδεόμενός τινος), Paul makes clear that God does not require sacrifices and physical service.<sup>79</sup> In this context, this statement is limited to applying to sacrifices and service in the temple; and the following statement further limits it to apply to that which gives life and maintains God’s life. God does not require material gifts to stay alive. Paul reasons<sup>80</sup> that God is the one who gives life and protects it (Psalm 50:7-15; Es 46:1 and Jeremiah 10:5).<sup>81</sup> In other words, it is God who provides everything that mankind requires; not the other way around. God’s life-giving work is based on him being the creator. Life (ζωὴν) and breath (πνοὴν) are one single expression for God giving life (cf. Genesis 2:7 and Es 42:5).<sup>82</sup> “Everything” (τὰ πάντα) is everything for the sustenance of life.<sup>83</sup> Paul speaks in the present tense and describes a part of God’s continued creating and sustaining activity.<sup>84</sup> With, “he, who provides life and breath and everything,” Paul identifies God as the giver of life.

Paul proclaims that God is the giver of life. Consequently, God is not to be served by human hands as though he requires sacrifices. Paul does not explicitly teach that life and the sustenance of life reveal God, but analogous to the fact that God’s actions in history reveal him (see verses 26-27), it is natural that God’s life-giving and life-sustaining activity reveals God. This is confirmed in Acts 14:15-17 and Romans 1:20. Paul re-reveals an element in the natural revelation.

Paul proclaims God as he has revealed himself in life and in the sustenance of life (natural revelation), and as he has revealed himself in the OT. God is identified with the God of the Old Testament. The second identification of the unknown God as the giver of life is a step in Paul’s critique of the Athenians’ idolatry. Paul proclaims the unknown God. The Athenians’ gods therefore cannot be identified with this God, and their worship is not the worship of this God. The revelation of God’s character also forms the basis for a critique of an element in the Athenians’

<sup>78</sup> Θεραπεύεται is used for service for God.

<sup>79</sup> This statement is not a general characterization of God’s being; it is therefore more misleading than clarifying to speak about God’s self-sufficiency or independence; cf. Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 216-218.

<sup>80</sup> The participial clause has causal meaning.

<sup>81</sup> The conception of God’s independence and lack of needs is well-known in Greek philosophy; cf. Plato, Aristotle and Stoics such as Euripides and Seneca.

<sup>82</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 198.

<sup>83</sup> τὰ πάντα cannot have cosmological significance because of πᾶσι. See Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 200-201.

<sup>84</sup> The Stoics agree as regards the notion of God’s providence (see Winter, *Public*, p. 133-135), but the Epicureans disagree (see Winter, *Public*, p. 137-138).

religious perception, i.e. that God requires sacrifices and favors. This is incompatible with God's character as he who provides life. God does not depend on sacrifices; rather, we depend on him. In this confrontation and critique, Paul is referring to something that he and the Athenians share in common: the natural revelation. The Athenians are familiar with natural revelation, but they have repressed this knowledge. This is apparent in their idolatry.<sup>85</sup>

### **5. God is the God of history (verses 26-27)**

In two steps, Paul has identified the true God. He has proclaimed two elements drawn from natural revelation: God is creator and Lord (first step) and God is not served by human hands, as it is He who provides life (second step). Paul continues his teaching and continues to identify the one true God. In his proclamation of the unknown God – loosened from the Athenians' polytheistic conceptions – Paul makes references to natural revelation. He includes an element from natural revelation in his teaching and re-reveals it.

#### **The third step: God as creator and the lord of history**

Paul again identifies the “unknown God” as the Creator; and as something new, as the lord of history. He proclaims that God has created every people from one father (Adam). Paul emphasizes the ontological unity of mankind, despite ethnic diversity. There is also talk of a creation-theological unity, as God created all peoples from the same father. The ontological and creation-theological unity of mankind corresponds to a universal revelation. There are three classical interpretations of verse 26.

1) The creation-theological interpretation (variant 1). Paul describes the creation of mankind and how God regulates the world of man by providing the seasons with fruit and by determining the zones for habitation on earth. In this interpretation, πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων equals “the whole human race.”<sup>86</sup> ἔθνος here denotes race or lineage. προστεταγμένους καιροῦς are the determined seasons, and τὰς ὁροθεσίας τῆς κατοικίας αὐτῶν are limits for the inhabited areas on earth. It refers to the two areas of the earth – “zones” – that are “fit for human habitation” as opposed to the three uninhabitable zones.<sup>87</sup> There are four problems with this interpretation. a) ἔθνος always has ethnic or ethnic-religious meaning in Luke's writings. Here, it must have the meaning “every people” in order to prevent “limits for their habitation” from becoming tautological in relation to “the entire surface of the earth”. b) καιροῦς in itself does not mean “seasons”, but this

<sup>85</sup> The Epicureans spoke about God's self-sufficiency and believed that God did not need anything from mankind (Winter, *Public*, p. 137).

<sup>86</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 28.

<sup>87</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 27-37, Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte II*, p. 137-138, Barrett, *Acts II*, p. 842-843 and Balch, *Speech*, p. 57-58.

is a meaning that is to be deduced from the context. However, there is nothing in the context that determines this to be “seasons”.<sup>88</sup> This interpretation is usually also based on references to Acts 14:17, but it is specified in Acts 14:17 that this is about seasons. c) τὰς ὁροθεσίας is not used in reference to the inhabited areas of the earth in opposition to the uninhabited areas.<sup>89</sup> d) The interpretation of τὰς ὁροθεσίας as the inhabited areas of the earth is in opposition to the notion that God created the peoples to inhabit the *entire* surface of the earth (verse 26).<sup>90</sup>

2) The creation-theological interpretation (variant 2).<sup>91</sup> πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων means “the whole race of men”. προστεταγμένους καιρῶν is the set seasons (Acts 14:17), and τὰς ὁροθεσίας τῆς κατοικίας αὐτῶν is the borders of the earth in relation to the sea.<sup>92</sup> This is based upon Psalm 74:17: “It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; you made both summer and winter.”<sup>93</sup> By providing the fertile times and dry land, God has provided the necessary means for mankind to be able to live. Here, borders become the borders of the earth in relation to the sea. In this interpretation, “borders for their habitation” becomes identical with “the entire surface of the earth.” Here, it is possible to advance the two first points of criticism in connection with the first interpretation.

3) The historical-geographical interpretation.<sup>94</sup> Paul describes the creation of the peoples and how God determined the times and borders for the peoples. In this interpretation, πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων is “every nation of men”.<sup>95</sup> ἔθνος is ethnic. This corresponds with the language in Luke’s writings. προστεταγμένους καιρῶν is the set time periods, and the times are specified in greater detail through the parallel τὰς ὁροθεσίας τῆς κατοικίας αὐτῶν as times for their habitation. τὰς ὁροθεσίας τῆς κατοικίας αὐτῶν are limits for the peoples.<sup>96</sup> This interpretation fits with the language used. God is the creator and lord of the peoples, and this dominion is manifest in how God provides the individual peoples their times and limits for their habitation. God steers history (cf. Deuteronomy 32:8; Job 12:23-24; Daniel 2:21; Daniel 4:22 and Luke 21:24).

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<sup>88</sup> See the criticism of Dibelius found in Pohlenz, *Paul*, p. 86-87, Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 147-148 and Wilson, *Mission*, p. 203-204.

<sup>89</sup> Pohlenz, *Paul*, p. 86.

<sup>90</sup> This is often advanced against Dibelius; e.g. Wilson, *Mission*, p. 204.

<sup>91</sup> Eltester, *Natur*, p. 209-219 and Haenchen, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 502-503.

<sup>92</sup> Haenchen, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 502, rejects Dibelius’ understanding of limits as inhabited zones.

<sup>93</sup> Haenchen, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 502-503 and Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 448.

<sup>94</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 146-148, Wilson, *Gentiles*, p. 204-205 and Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 214-215.

<sup>95</sup> πᾶν, together with the indefinite noun ἔθνος, can either mean “the entire people” or “every people” (see Moule, *Idiom-Book*, p. 94-95).

<sup>96</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 147-148 and Wilson, *Mission*, p. 205.



God the creator has created all of the peoples among mankind from one father (Adam). Using two infinitives, Paul formulates the purpose of this creation. As κατοικεῖν and ζητεῖν are placed together with God's creation, it is natural to understand them as expressions of God's creation-theological intention. In other words, the infinitives are final.<sup>97</sup> Between the two infinitives is a parenthetical sentence, which is best linked together with the previous, because it resumes the habitation theme.<sup>98</sup> The two infinitives could be parallel. However, here the habitation of the peoples and their conditions fall out of the context. Habitation is not an independent motif, but rather integrated in the main point in verses 26-27, i.e. that the people are to seek God.<sup>99</sup> In brief, the essence in verses 26-27: God has given man time and limits for their habitation so that they seek him. It is therefore better to let the second infinitive be subordinate to the first. Paul proclaims that God has created all of the peoples from a single father, and God's first purpose is that the people are to inhabit the entire surface of the earth. This is gradually fulfilled. This statement is based upon God's commandment that mankind is to fill the earth (Genesis 1:28). "After he has set the times and boundaries for their habitation" describes some arrangements for the habitation of the people, which make habitation possible, and which are reasons why the people ought to seek God. There is talk of God's predestination as regards the historic periods and limits of peoples. προσεταγμένους καιρούς is qualified by the following genitive, which determines the times for their habitation. καιρούς becomes periods of time. τὰς ὁροθεσίας means "boundaries" and is qualified by τῆς κατοικίας αὐτῶν as boundaries for habitation. God has determined specific periods for the peoples. Their times are in God's hands. God has set limits for their habitation. The areas of the peoples are in God's hands.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Pohlenz, *Paul*, p. 85, understands the verb ἐποίησεν as the auxiliary verb for κατοικεῖν ("he allowed to settle"); Pohlenz reproduces the sentence in the following manner: "Gott hat die Menschen zu Bewohnern des Erdballs gemacht, auf dass sie Gott suchen sollen." In terms of the meaning, this interpretation is not different from my own, as Pohlenz correctly emphasizes that the emphasis is placed on seeking God. But because of ὁ ποιήσας in verse 24 and ἐξ ἑνός, which emphasizes the notion of creation, the verb acquires independent meaning.

<sup>98</sup> The alternative is to tie the participial clause to the other infinitive (ζητεῖν). In terms of meaning, this has no significance, as the other final infinitive is subordinate to the first, meaning that God's determination of the times and limits for human habitation have revelation-theological meaning, where the intention is for the people to seek God.

<sup>99</sup> Pohlenz has clearly seen that the habitation is not an independent motif, *Paul*, p. 84. He correctly sets the participial clause as a specification of ἐποίησεν κατοικεῖν and subordinate to it. On the other hand, he incorrectly reproduces Paul when he writes: "Der Mensch ist geschaffen, dass er Gott suche."

<sup>100</sup> Pohlenz, *Paul*, p. 85, initially paraphrases verses 26-27 with the following: "Gott hat die Menschen zu Bewohnern des Erdballs gemacht, auf dass sie Gott suchen sollen." This sentence is suited to make an impression on the Stoics. Pohlenz reiterates the Stoics' fundamental perception (p. 85): "Pflanzen und Tiere sind um des Menschen willen geworden; der Mensch selbst aber ist dazu geschaffen, die Wunder des Kosmos zu betrachten und aus ihnen Gott zu erkennen." It is on the basis of this Stoic understanding that we are to understand the participial clause in verse 26. Pohlenz, *Paul*, p. 87, believes that "dass bei der Zusammenstellung von καιροὶ und ὁροθεσία die zeitliche und räumliche Entwicklung der Menschenvölker gemeint sein müsse." This opens up for a philosophical understanding of

The second purpose is that every people is to seek God. This shows that God's arrangements for the habitation of the peoples is a revelation. The arrangements are God's deal with the people, and as the purpose with this deal is that the people are to seek God, God's actions in the history of the peoples qualify as a revelation of God. This is confirmed when Paul characterizes the speech as a proclamation (cf. *καταγγέλλω* in verse 23). Proclamation is revelation, and when Paul re-reveals God's activity in history, this is qualified as revelation.<sup>101</sup> God thus reveals himself in the history of the peoples by placing times and limits for them. This is part of the natural revelation.<sup>102</sup> This revelation provides knowledge of God, as the intention is that they are to seek him. God's activity throughout history reveals God as the Lord of history. On that background, this seeking after God cannot be cognitive: to seek knowledge about God.<sup>103</sup> The peoples have knowledge of God via God's revelation in creation and history. This is confirmed in Acts 14:15-17 and Romans 1:18-21. God's purpose also tells us that throughout history, God reveals himself as the lord of mankind, who makes claim on mankind and can demand that mankind seeks him.<sup>104</sup> "To seek God" means to see God in recognition and obedience (cf. Romans 1:21 and 25).<sup>105</sup> This interpretation is confirmed in verse 24, where Paul writes that God reveals himself as Lord, who has a claim on our life and existence.

The phrase "to seek God" requires separation from God; with "to seek God", Paul does not just formulate a seeking after a goal, but this seeking includes both repentance (verse 30) and the attainment of an objective. How realistic is the achievement of this objective? Two

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the text, as Pohlenz refers to the Stoics' proof of God "e consensu gentium" (p. 88); despite a differentiation, as regards the peoples, there is a shared "Urbesitz" as regards the existence of the divine and certain characteristics. Pohlenz's paraphrasing (p. 88-89) reveals his understanding of the text: "All den über den ganzen Erdball verteilten Menschen hat Gott von ihrem einheitlichen Ursprung her unbeschadet ihrer völkischen Differenzierung gleichermassen das Suchen nach Gott ins Herz gepflanzt." Wilson, *Mission*, p. 205, correctly writes: "Pohlenz's idea of an argument *e consensu gentium* reads into the text something that is not there. It implies that God implanted searching in all men in spite of their differentiation, and the text does not say that."

<sup>101</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 152.

<sup>102</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 147-148 and Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 215. Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 60, writes about proof of god, but the text does not refer to proofs of god, logical conclusions or deductions. There is talk of a revelation. Paul includes an element from natural revelation in his *proclamation*, thus qualifying it as revelation.

<sup>103</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 32, is of the opinion that ζητεῖν is Hellenistically understood and that seeking God "is a matter of thinking." Pohlenz, *Paul*, p. 89, maintains a Stoic interpretation: "Allen Menschen hat Gott den Trieb eingepflanzt, ihn zu suchen, und sie haben auch die Möglichkeit, Gott zu erkennen, da sie selbst seines Wesens sind." However, Paul's speech includes nothing about such an "implanted urge." Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 448, writes: "Es geht in unserem text um die Erkenntnis, dass sie aus dem Schöpfungswerk und der Welt schliessen sollen, dass es nur einen Gott gibt." Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 153, correctly criticizes that there is talk of deduction and that mankind has an inner urge to seek God. "There is no term connected with ζητεῖν saying that part of the Divine *Logos* is inherent in man, that he is impelled by an inward urge to seek God, and that this urge is developed in contemplation of his own nature and the world."

<sup>104</sup> Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 214-215.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 153.

relationships are to be considered when answering this question. The one relationship is God's revelation in creation on the macro level (heaven and earth and everything; verse 24) and on the micro level (the human; verse 25), in history (verse 26) and in his active, life-giving sustenance of mankind (verse 27-28). All of this is God's revelation. This is just as clear as creation, history and life. On this basis, the purpose is realistic and almost unavoidable. Who has not encountered this revelation? Who does not know him through this revelation? The second relationship is the idolatry of the people. Here, Paul speaks specifically about the Athenians' idolatry. The city is full of idols (verse 16); Paul states that their religiosity is idolatry (verse 22); he refers to their cultic objects (verse 23); he refers to their religious conceptions regarding idols (verses 24; 25 and 29); and he refers to their ignorance, which is characteristic of their idolatry (verses 23 and 30). On this basis, God's purpose is unrealistic and impossible. Their actual idolatry, their actual resistance towards Paul's proclamation and their actual religious ignorance about God demonstrate that the people – despite God's revelation – did not seek God. Instead, they sought out idols. And they found them. God's purpose was not fulfilled.<sup>106</sup>

On that background, “if they could possibly grope for him and find him” formulates a vain hope or purpose.<sup>107</sup> εἰ ἄρα γε plus optative can express, that something is possible – as a rule, a distant possibility – or that something is doubtful. The historic framework for the speech and the speech itself show that the peoples – exemplified by the Athenians – have not sought out or seek God; do not grope for God, and have not found God. The historic framework for the speech refers to the Athenians' idolatry. In practice, it shows that it is not realistic that they will grope after and find God.<sup>108</sup> In other words, with this sentence, Paul formulates a vain hope or purpose.<sup>109</sup> ψηλαφήσειαν αὐτὸν means “grope after God.”<sup>110</sup> The word provokes an image of a

<sup>106</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 27 and Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 215.

<sup>107</sup> εἰ ἄρα γε ψηλαφήσειαν αὐτὸν καὶ εὔροιεν is an indirect question (BDR 386,2). Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 1020-1021, uses “Remote Prospect of Determination” as the heading for this type of conditional clauses and depicts their range with: “It is thus suitable not merely for real doubt, but it also fits well the polite temper of courteous address.” Moule, *Idiom-Book*, p. 154, writes that the indirect question with optative “is used to give a more tentative and cautious tone.” HS §273f writes that εἰ – often reinforced with ἄρα γε – means “ob etwa, ob vielleicht” and that “häufig empfiehlt es sich, zur Wiedergabe des Bedeutungselementes des Versuchens, Anstrebens bzw. Erhoffens ein Verb oder einen anderen geeigneten Ausdruck zu ergänzen.” Wallace, *Greek*, p. 484, makes the following comments on this type of conditional sentence: “It is used to indicate a *possible* condition in the future, usually a remote possibility.”

<sup>108</sup> According to the “philosophical” interpretation, where the verses in verses 27-28 are interpreted Stoically, it is said that it is possible to find God. There is typically talk of the possible but not the certain, and the possible is reasoned on the grounds that God is close to everyone. καὶ γε οὐ μακρὰν ἀπὸ ἐνὸς ἐκάστου ἡμῶν ὑπάρχοντα is understood as a reason.

<sup>109</sup> See Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 1021 and 1030 and Bruce, *Greek*, p. 337.

<sup>110</sup> εἰ ἄρα γε means “if”. γε has a reinforcing meaning.

man who is fumbling in the darkness; or of a blind man fumbling along.<sup>111</sup> The use of the verb ψηλαφήσειαν tells us that this seeking God is uncertain.<sup>112</sup>

#### **The fourth step: God as the omnipresent creator, life-giver and sustainer**

God has revealed himself throughout history so that the peoples should seek him. But this has been in vain. The peoples were not able to fumble their way to God. This is not the fault of the revelation. The statement “and though he is not far from a single one of us” (καὶ γε οὐ μακρὰν ἀπὸ ἐνὸς ἐκάστου ἡμῶν ὑπάρχοντα) refers to a universal and revealed omnipresence, which thus attains a concessive meaning and emphasizes that this hypothetical groping after God is taking place despite his revealed nearness.<sup>113</sup> The statement describes God’s nearness. It is possible for this nearness to be understood on the basis of the above, where Paul proclaims history as a revelation of God (verse 26). However, as verse 27c is tied together with the following via γὰρ (verse 28), this nearness is to be interpreted on the basis of verses 28-29.

a) God’s “nearness” could be understood locally; that God is close to us but not entirely together with us. There is still a minor spatial distance between mankind and God. But when we interpret God’s “nearness” on the basis of verse 28a, we see that this nearness is supposed to be interpreted in relational terms. There is talk of an existing relationship between God and mankind, for by him we live, move and have our being.

b) This relationship is creation-theological, understood as God’s omnipresent creating, life-giving and sustaining activity.<sup>114</sup> In his speech, Paul has emphasized the transcendence of God and his dominion over the creation. God and the creation are separate. God is the Creator, the lord of creation and history. The speech has also described God’s immanence through his creative activity, life-giving activity and active dominion. But the transcendence of God in this immanence is maintained. For this reason, the notion that God is not far from any of us cannot be understood pantheistically, as though God is in everything in keeping with the pantheistic

<sup>111</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 160-161. The verb can have the meaning “to touch” about a physical contact, but that meaning does not fit here. On the basis of the understanding of God which Paul is proclaiming, there cannot be talk of actually touching God.

<sup>112</sup> Balch, *Speech*, p. 77 is of the opinion that Stoics such as Posidonius and Chrysostom illuminate the speech. Here, he quotes from Chrysostom’s “Oration” (12.60-61): “All men have a strong yearning to honour and worship the deity from close at hand.” This is explicitly refuted by the Athenians’ rejection of God and their idolatry.

<sup>113</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 27 and Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 164. Verse 27c cannot serve as a reason (contra Pohlenz, *Paul*, p. 89 and Haenchen, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 504), as God’s nearness cannot be the cause of it being doubtful – though possible – or that it is doubtful and impossible to fumble after God and find him. In as much as God’s nearness is a fact, and in as much as this nearness has revelation-theological significance such that this nearness is also a revealed nearness, this statement – as a reason is only able to be the cause of and insure the obvious and unavoidable aspects of this seeking after God. Neither the form of the sentence nor the use of the word “fumble” suit the cause. The statement will therefore attain an optimistic tone, which does not correspond to the formulation.

<sup>114</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p.178.

understanding and that mankind is divine because mankind is in him. Nor can it be understood personally, as though mankind is in a living, personal connection to God as creator such that it owns the spiritual life. The speech about the unknown God, about ignorant idolatry, about a futile fumbling after God excludes mankind being in the connection of faith with God. Nor can it be understood in the actual mystical sense, such that God and mankind are melded together in one unit and where the limits of the personality are broken down so that the “I” and God float together. That God is not far from any of us is to be understood in terms of creation theology as a statement regarding God’s omnipresent creating, life-giving and sustaining activity.<sup>115</sup> This is also confirmed in the continuation.

In his proclamation of the unknown God – loosened from the Athenians’ polytheistic conceptions – Paul refers to natural revelation. He includes elements from natural revelation in his proclamation and re-reveals them. God is the Creator who has created the peoples from a single person, and the creation (the people) reveal him as Creator; God is the lord of history, who has set times for the peoples and limits for their habitation, and history reveals him as the lord of history and He who demands acknowledgement from mankind. God is the omnipresent life-giver. He gives life and sustains life in man, and the existence of mankind reveals Him as the omnipresent provider of life. God is identified as the God of the Old Testament. The third and fourth identification of the unknown God as creator, the lord of history and mankind and as the God that provides life is part of Paul’s criticism of the Athenians’ idolatry. Paul proclaims the unknown God. Therefore, the Athenians’ gods cannot be identified with this God, and their worship is not the worship of this God. In this critique, Paul refers to that which he and the Athenians share in common: natural revelation. The Athenians are familiar with it, but they have repressed it. This is seen in their idolatry.

#### **6. God is the omnipresent life-giver (verses 28-29)**

In the course of four steps, Paul has identified the one true God. He has proclaimed a number of elements from natural revelation: God is creator and Lord (first step), God is not served by human hands but instead provides life (second step), God as creator and lord of history (third step), and God as the omnipresent creator, life-giver and sustainer (fourth step). Paul continues his proclamation and proceeds to identify the one true God. In his proclamation of the unknown God –

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<sup>115</sup> Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte 2*, p. 241, writes: “Die Nähe zu Gott ist nicht räumlich verstanden, sondern, wie das V28c angefügte Aratos-Zitat angedeutet, auf die Gottverwandschaft des menschen bezogen.”

loosened from the Athenians' polytheistic conceptions –Paul refers to natural revelation. He includes an element from natural revelation in his proclamation and re-reveals it.

#### **The fifth step: God as the omnipresent life-giver and sustainer**

Paul identifies “the unknown God” as the omnipresent giver and sustainer of life. He already touches upon this theme in verse 27c. In verse 28, Paul reasons that God is close to each one of us: “for by him we live and move and are” (ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ ζῶμεν καὶ κινούμεθα καὶ ἐσμέν).<sup>116</sup> In this context, this phrase is to be interpreted on the basis of the speech thus far and in comparison with verse 28b.

First, the phrase must be interpreted on the basis of the previous part of the speech, where Paul emphasizes God's transcendence and dominion over creation. Therefore, verse 28a cannot be understood pantheistically, personally or mystically, but “for by him we live and more and are” is to be understood in creation-theology terms, i.e. about God's omnipresent giving and sustaining of life.<sup>117</sup> Paul has spoken about God's nearness, and this nearness has an a-personal character, which does not include a relation to God in thanksgiving and worship. This is based on ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ ζῶμεν καὶ κινούμεθα καὶ ἐσμέν, which formulates an a-personal relationship to God. Second, “for by him we live and move and are” is to be interpreted on the basis of the comparison with the fact that we are God's people. Referring to the quote, Paul expresses a similarity applying to one thing, namely that mankind, just like God is alive. The quote also states that the life and existence of mankind depends on God. The comparison indicates that “for by him we live and move and are” is understood in terms of creation theology: we live in a state of dependence upon God. Thirdly, “for by him we live and over and are” is to be interpreted on the basis of the call to conversion. Paul's speech about the ignorant times, the call to conversion and the judgment determine the relationship to God in verse 28a as a relationship to a God, who is not known. “For by him we live and move and are” describes an existing relationship to the unknown and rejected God. It describes a relationship to God that will judge mankind; it points out that “for by him we live and move and are” is to be understood in terms of creation theology.

Within the context of the speech itself, it is natural to understand “for by him we live and move and are” in creation theology terms, i.e. as God's omnipresent giving and sustaining of life.<sup>118</sup> The phrase describes the total dependence of mankind upon God. Without God, no life.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> This is hardly a quote due to the continuation, which explicitly introduces the following as quote.

<sup>117</sup> Owen, *Scope*, p. 136.

<sup>118</sup> Mosbech, *Apostlenes Gerninger*, p. 205, writes (own translation): “in reality, it is the Stoic-Pantheistic (cf. Til V.18) conception of the divine as the all-life in motion around us, as we ourselves are a link in and a part of the divine life.”

On the background of verse 25, ἐν αὐτῷ is to be understood as “by him”. This has instrumental significance.<sup>120</sup> ζῶμεν describes the life of mankind; κινούμεθα human movement and ἔσμεν human existence. The differences between the three expressions are subtle, and it is therefore best to understand the triad as a collective expression of human life and existence in dependence upon God.<sup>121</sup>

By using the comparative conjunction ὥς, Paul introduces a quote from one of their poets.<sup>122</sup> The quote is from Aratus, a Stoic, and is originally about our status as the descendants of Zeus. The quote is about the god Zeus, but this god is understood Stoically as Logos, world reason, which penetrates everything and makes everything living.<sup>123</sup> Phainomena 1-5:

*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 ...*<sup>124</sup>

Zeus is understood immanent-pantheistically; as the power and world reason, which penetrates and fills everything and which also penetrates and fills mankind. The relationship with Zeus is understood on the basis of this immanent-pantheistic understanding of the divine. Mankind is a part of the divine. The decisive argument for the philosophical interpretation is found in verse 28; not least in the quote from Aratus. The quote indicates that “We are his offspring” is to be understood

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Conzelmann, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 109, writes about “einer pantheistischen Trias”. Wilson, *Mission*, p. 207, writes: “But the Old Testament and Jewish notion of God’s omnipresence is not the real background to the phrase.” “The language of this phrase is basically Stoic, but it is improbable that Luke intended it to be understood pantheistically.” In connection with verse 28a, Schille writes in *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 358, that the phrase has an assumed “Herkunft aus dem Pantheismus (der Stoa?).” Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte 2*, p. 241 writes about “die triadische pantheistische Formel.” Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte 2*, p. 138-139, mentions as the one of two possibilities: “Übersetzt man ἐν αὐτῷ mit ‘in ihm’, so ist Leben, Bewegung und Sein des Menschen ‘in Gott’ pantheistisch gedacht als Immanenz des Menschen in der alles durchwaltenden Gottheit.”

<sup>119</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 195 and Barrett, *Acts II*, p. 846.

<sup>120</sup> ἐν αὐτῷ does not have local meaning (“in him”); it could be relational (“in relation to him”).

<sup>121</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 189 and 197 and Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 216. Pohlenz, *Paul*, p. 90, writes to the two statements in verse 28, that they “aus pantheistischen Weltgefühl heraus konzipiert ist, kann kein Zweifel unterliegen. Ebenso selbstverständlich ist freilich, dass der Christ diese Worte rein in theistischem Sinne versteht.” To the sentence “in him we live and move and are”, Pohlenz writes that it first attains its “volle plastische Kraft ... wenn wir an das Allgefühl des Poseidonios denken, an seinen Glauben, dass der Kosmos ein grosser einheitlicher Organismus ist, in dem alle Teile in engster ‘Sympathie’ miteinander stehen und ihr Leben und Dasein nur aus dem Ganzen und im Zusammenhang mit ihm haben.”

<sup>122</sup> “As some of your poets have said” is a literary convention and does not mean that Paul quotes others or includes verse 28a as a quote.

<sup>123</sup> Bruce, *Greek*, p. 338-339.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Faber, *Apostle*, p. 2.

Stoically-pantheistically and that verse 28a must similarly be interpreted in a Stoic-pantheistic direction.

There is no doubt that the quote was originally about Zeus and expresses a Stoic-pantheistic understanding of the divine, but Paul gives the quote a different meaning than it originally had. Paul places the quote in a new context, and it must now be understood in this new context. The quote must therefore be read in context with the preceding. On the basis of verses 24-27, we can see that Paul changes the content of the quote and loosens it from its original meaning in three ways.<sup>125</sup> First, Paul uses it in reference to God instead of Zeus. Paul has proclaimed God to be the world's creator, lord and life-giver. This is the new context for the quote, meaning that Zeus is removed from the quote and replaced with God the Creator, Lord and Life-giver. In other words, Paul does not identify Zeus with God; nor is it possible to do so, as Zeus is an idol that they are to turn away from. Second, Paul changes the understanding of the divine expressed in the quote. In the quote, "god" is understood in immanent-pantheistic terms. The god of Zeus is world-reason (logos), which penetrates everything, but Paul has proclaimed the transcendent God, who in his immanence as creator, lord of history and giver of life maintains his transcendence. This is the new context for the quote, meaning that the understanding of the divine is to be changed from immanent-pantheistic to theistic-transcendent. Third, Paul changes the understanding of "descendant". In the original context, "we are his offspring" means that mankind is divine and feels suffused with reason. Previously, Paul has proclaimed God as creator, sustainer and giver of life. This is the new context for the quote, meaning that the word "descendants" is to be understood in terms of creation theology, i.e. that mankind is created by God (see verse 26 and cf. Luke 3:38). The rest of the speech (verses 29-31) constitutes the second part of this new context, and this part confirms that Paul interprets the quote theistically about the transcendent God. In other words, Paul

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<sup>125</sup> Bruce, *Acts*, p. 360 asks: "Is he, then, simply detaching from their original contexts sentiments which, so far as their actual phraseology goes, lend themselves to incorporation into his revelational context?" Bruce believes that the question can be answered affirmatively and defends this use of quotes on the condition that "these pagan writers, 'as creatures of God confronted with the divine revelation were capable of responses which were valid so long as and to the extent that they stood in isolation from their pagan systems. Thus, thoughts which in their pagan contexts were quite un-Christian and anti-Christian, could be acknowledged as up to a point involving an actual apprehension of revealed truth'". The quote within the quote is from Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 29-30. It is possible to talk about "demythologization". Marshall, *Acts*, p. 289, writes: "Paul thus takes over pagan Greek poems, expressive of Stoic philosophy, and applies them to God. A process of 'demythologization' was already under way in that for the Stoics 'Zeus' meant not the supreme god in Greek polytheism but the Logos." Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte 2*, p. 139, writes: "Das Zitat ist insofern äusserst geschickt gewählt, als die Aussage, dass die Menschen von Gottes Geschlecht sind, aus dem Horizont ontologisch verstandener Gottesverwandtschaft wiederum in den biblisch schöpfungs-theologischen Horizont gerückt werden kann."



contextualizes the quote, as he loosens it from its original context and provides it with new content.<sup>126</sup>

The introduction (ὥς καὶ) to the quote explains how Paul has understood this within this theistic-transcendent framework. Via the comparative ὥς καὶ, Paul tells of how the quote expresses the same as that life, movement and existence are in God. Verse 28a, via ὥς καὶ, is the decisive key for interpretation.<sup>127</sup> With the quote from Aratus, Paul proclaims that we (mankind) are God's descendants. "Descendants" is not considered ontologically in terms of our being in God's likeness

, but rather understood in terms of creation theology. With "descendant" (γένος), Paul formulates the similarity between mankind and God. This similarity refers to life. In verse 29, Paul uses "since we are God's descendants" to reason that it is wrong to believe that the divine is something dead (gold, silver or stone). "God's descendants" then means that we live in a state of dependence upon a living God. The point of comparison between "for by him we live and move and are" and "we are his descendants" is a life in a state of dependence upon God.<sup>128</sup>

In verse 28, Paul has proclaimed that mankind exists in a state of total dependence upon God. Using οὖν, Paul injects a conclusion that is based on mankind being God's descendant. "Since we are his descendant" provides the reason<sup>129</sup> why the divine cannot be equated with gold, silver or stone, a picture produced by a craftsman or a human conception. We have seen that "we are God's descendant" means that we have our lives and existence in God. Paul argues (paradoxically) from human to God to images of idols. The logic is as follows:

As mankind is God's descendant, i.e. living,  
then God himself must be living  
and then the divine cannot be anything material,  
produced and conceived by mankind

<sup>126</sup> Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 216 note 521, writes: "We are concerned with these quotations *as integral parts of Paul's speech*, in which setting they have to be interpreted."

<sup>127</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p.166-167 and 193 and 222.

<sup>128</sup> "His offspring" does not refer to mankind being created in God's image, as Bruce, *Acts*, p. 360 and Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 449, seem to believe. Wilson, *Mission*, p. 208, writes: "On hearing this quotation, a Christian or Jew would immediately associate the idea of the *imago Dei* in Genesis with the idea of relatedness to God in Aratus' γένος, though strictly speaking the two do not converge."

<sup>129</sup> γένος ὑπάρχοντες τοῦ θεοῦ has causal significance.

With “since we are God’s descendant”, Paul proclaims that God is alive; the contrast between idols made of gold, silver or stone then becomes an opposition between the living and the dead.<sup>130</sup> Mankind cannot produce the living God using inanimate materials such as gold, silver and stone.<sup>131</sup> In the phrase “God’s descendant” (γένος ... τοῦ θεοῦ), God (τοῦ θεοῦ) is the true God; the creator, giver of life, lord of history and the omnipresent God. “The divine” (τὸ θεῖον) is God as he is. With “a craftsman’s image and a person’s conception” (χαράγματι τέχνης καὶ ἐνθυμήσεως ἀνθρώπου), Paul is explaining how he is thinking about images of idols that are formed and conceived by people. Using ὅμοιον, Paul rejects that there is an identity between God himself and the images of idols. This is both in the sense that the image of the idol is God and is identified with God and in the sense that the image of the idol produces God and thus describes what God looks like and his being.<sup>132</sup> Paul rejects both the notion that the images of idols have divine reality and that they have a representative and revealing function<sup>133</sup>

Paul makes reference to natural revelation: God is the omnipresent giver of life to mankind, and the life and existence of mankind reveals him as the provider and sustainer of life. Paul re-reveals this element from natural revelation. Paul does not explicitly proclaim that the life and existence of mankind reveals God, but analogous to God’s actions in history revealing him (see verses 26-27), it is natural that the existence of mankind reveals God. God is revealed by his actions. This is confirmed in Acts 14:15-17 and Romans 1:20. God is identified with the God of the Old Testament. This fifth identification of the unknown God as He who provides and sustains life is part of Paul’s criticism of the Athenians’ idolatry. Paul proclaims the unknown God. Therefore, the Athenians’ idols cannot be identified with this God, and their idolatry is not the worship of this God. The revelation of God’s character also forms the basis for the critique of an element in the Athenians’ religiosity: the Athenians’ images of idols. Images of idols consisting of dead materials cannot depict the living God. In this confrontation and critique, Paul draws reference to something

<sup>130</sup> Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 217, writes: “Their divine origin as creatures, their own life and the tokens of God’s vivacity should have kept the Gentiles from assuming that τὸ θεῖον could be captured or reproduced in dead matter.” Conzelmann, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 110, believes that two motifs are mixed together, namely a) the Greek notion that living things can only be produced from living things and b) the Jewish notion that the creator cannot be depicted using the creation. Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 449, believes that behind this is the Jewish notion that it is not possible to create an image of the Creator but of the creation. Many scholars find this logic to be strained, as it is logical that it is possible to produce the divine in human form (Conzelmann, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 505 and Haenchen, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 110).

<sup>131</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 222-223 and Marshall, *Acts*, p. 289 and Barrett, *Acts 2*, p. 849.

<sup>132</sup> On the Stoics’ “opposition to images of the deity”, see Balch, *Speech*, p. 67-72.

<sup>133</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 55, believes that the polemics regarding the images of gods are mild. He writes: “... the writer does not wish to speak in the tone of one accusing the heathen world of their sin, but as one who is enlightening them in their ignorance.”

that he and the Athenians share in common, i.e. natural revelation. The Athenians are familiar with this, but they have repressed it. This displays their idolatry and images of idols.

### **7. The call to conversion (verses 30-31)**

In the five steps, Paul has identified the one true God. He has proclaimed some of the elements from natural revelation: God is creator and Lord (first step); God is not served by human hands, but rather provides life (second step); God as creator and the lord of history (third step); God as omnipresent creator, provider and sustainer of life (fourth step); and God as the omnipresent provider and sustainer of life (fifth step). Paul has now identified the one true God. He has revealed him for his listeners through his proclamation, thereby re-revealing elements from the natural revelation of God. On the base of this revelation of God, Paul can conclude his speech with a call to conversion.<sup>134</sup> Paul divides time in two epochs. He characterizes the first epoch as “the age of ignorance.” This now belongs to the past. The second is the age of the proclamation of conversion. This is now the present for these Athenians, who are listening to Paul’s proclamation. As regards “the age of ignorance” (τοὺς χρόνους τῆς ἀγνοίας), Paul says two things.

First, he says that there was an age characterized by ignorance (ἄγνοια). There are two interpretations.

1) Ignorance is an ignorance of the true God.<sup>135</sup> This ignorance ceases upon hearing the proclamation of the true God. In this interpretation, it is typical to interpret God’s tolerance as indicating that God has a mild perspective on their idolatry, as it is the result of ignorance,<sup>136</sup> or there is talk of their idolatry being partially excused.<sup>137</sup> In the context of the speech itself, this interpretation is impossible. Paul has already spoken of God’s revelation in creation, in history and in the lives of mankind. God has revealed himself as creator and lord, as the lord of history and provider of life. This is a revelation that provided knowledge of God and which should have motivated man to seek God (Acts 17:27) but did not do so. The Athenians have rejected the true God and worship idols instead. Paul proclaims a natural revelation of God, which takes place in the past and present. God has revealed himself and continues to reveal himself. While speaking on the Areopagus, Paul stands as a man who is living, moving and has his being by God; and he is

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<sup>134</sup> With a transitional μὲν οὖν, Paul proceeds to the conclusion of the speech.

<sup>135</sup> Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte 2*, p. 243.

<sup>136</sup> Wilson, *Gentiles*, p. 210 is a representative of the “mild” interpretation. He writes: “The clue seems to lie in v.23: here it is said that the Greeks worship God but do not know him, while in the following verses the expression of their worship – the idols and images – are shown to be false. There is both a positive assessment of their religiosity and worship and a positive condemnation of their idolatry. There is a mixture of both tolerance and reproof, conciliation and rebuke. The Gentiles have been misguided, but their ignorance is an excuse.”

<sup>137</sup> Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 55.

speaking to people who live, move and have their being in God and who reveal God through their very existence and life. In as much as the revelation is continuous and in as much as the revelation of God and the knowledge of God is the same for Paul, the conclusion is that after their rejection, the Athenians still know God. In other words, the Athenians are not ignorant about God.

2) Ignorance refers to their idolatry.<sup>138</sup> This can be characterized as ignorance about the true God. Here, we draw a distinction. God has revealed himself for the Gentiles via natural revelation, and the Gentiles are therefore not ignorant about God; instead, they worship idols, and in their idolatry they are ignorant about God. The Athenians do not come to know the true God through their idols, and the Athenians do not worship the true God through their idols. “Age of ignorance” (τοὺς χρόνους τῆς ἀγνοίας) is the age of idolatry.<sup>139</sup> In defense of this interpretation, one can note:

a) The context points in this direction. In the immediately preceding verse (verse 29), Paul refers to the Athenians’ idols and their false identification of the divine using inanimate materials. The contrast in the call to conversion in verse 30 is between ignorance (ἄγνοια) in the past and God, who is now proclaimed. Paul calls the Athenians to turn away from their ignorance and to God. Verse 29 leads to their “ignorance” referring to their idolatry.

b) The call to conversion and the speech regarding the eschatological judgment indicate that “ignorance” is not to be understood neutrally and not a cognitive ignorance, but rather that this ignorance has a built-in rejection of God.<sup>140</sup> In this context, the Athenians’ opposition to God is localized in their idolatry.

c) Using the reference to the altar for the unknown god, Paul proclaims to them that they are ignorant about God in their idolatry.

d) Their false sense of God living in man-made temples gives their idolatry a sense of ignorance.

e) The false conception that God needs sacrifices gives their idolatry a sense of ignorance.

f) The false identification of the divine using inanimate materials gives their idolatry a sense of ignorance.

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<sup>138</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 233 and 237-238, Barr, *Faith*, p. 22, Barrett, *Acts*, p. 850-851 and Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 450. Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 218, writes: “All religious activities of Gentiles before the arrival of the proclamation are subsumed as ignorance of God, his nature and worship.”

<sup>139</sup> In another context it is possible to talk of ignorance (Acts 3:17 and 13:27).

<sup>140</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 22, writes: “Their ignorance was a sinful ignorance ...” Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 237, writes: “Μετανοεῖν and κρίνειν show clearly the spirit in which ἀγνοία should be read.”

g) The contrast between the Athenians' gods and the true God, whom Paul reveals in his proclamation, declares that their gods are false gods.

Natural revelation is a continual revelation. The Athenians encounter it constantly, and the context and content of the speech tell of how the Athenians have rejected the true God such as he has revealed himself to them. This is indicated in the reference to the Athenians' idolatry in Acts 17:16. This is indicated in Paul's address in verse 22. This is indicated in his reference to their cultic monuments in verse 23. This is indicated in their flawed understanding of gods' need for sacrifices in verse 25. This is indicated in their false identification of God with various images of idols in verse 29. And this is indicated in the call to conversion in verses 30-31. In other words, the Athenians have rejected God and worship their own gods instead. This reveals how their idolatry stands in opposition to the true God.

Second, Paul tells of how "the age of ignorance" was a time in which God displayed tolerance. Paul uses ὑπεριδῶν when referring to this tolerance. In the context, this is placed in contrast to the call to conversion and the eschatological judgment. God's tolerance is that he withholds his eschatological judgment (cf. Acts 14:16 and Romans 2:4).<sup>141</sup> A relative principle of grace determines God's action.<sup>142</sup> This means that if the Athenians were still in the age of ignorance when God will execute his eschatological judgment, they would be judged. But God withholds his judgment, making it possible for the proclamation to reach the Athenians. God's tolerance thus indicates that the Athenians are accountable for this ignorance and that they will be judged if they remain in it.<sup>143</sup> God's tolerance is placed together with natural revelation, as the tolerance is to be understood on the background of God's revelation as the creator and lord, who lays claim to the existence of mankind. God's tolerance therefore becomes an indirect aspect of natural revelation. God manifests his power and demands in this tolerance and in the permission to idolatry expressed therein. God is actively present in the lives and history of the people through his tolerance. At the same time, this tolerance implies a form of abandonment by God. Their ignorance (idolatry) lacks the contact with God inherent in faith.

"The age of ignorance" is replaced by a new age. This age is marked by a "now" (τὰ νῦν). This "now" is determined to be the new age of the call to conversion. In this age, God proclaims. He is the subject of "proclaims" (παραγγέλλει), and God proclaims for mankind that everyone must convert. This proclamation has a universal aim. Paul indicates as much with his

<sup>141</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 21, Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 229-230.

<sup>142</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 39 and Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 218.

<sup>143</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 22.

use of “mankind” (τοῖς ἀνθρώποις), “everyone” (πάντας) and “everywhere” (πανταχοῦ). Paul teaches about God’s revelation to the Gentiles. “Mankind” (τοῖς ἀνθρώποις) is the Gentiles as category. The “everyone” (πάντας) and “everywhere” (πανταχοῦ) that follows defines “mankind” as every member of the Gentile peoples. Without exception, everyone was previously in ignorance.<sup>144</sup> For the Gentiles, this represents a shift in the history of God’s salvation. They were previously ignorant; now they hear the proclamation. As Paul formulates the new in this general and universal manner, it indicates that we are to think “the age of ignorance” in both salvation-historical and person-historical categories. On the salvation-historical level, a new age is introduced with the death and resurrection of Christ. Now it is also the age of proclamation for the Gentiles. On the person-historical level, a new age is introduced in as much as the proclamation comes to the individual, to a group or a city. For the Athenians, who Paul was teaching, something new happens: the age of ignorance is over.

The demand regarding conversion is universal. This demand is formulated in terms of μετανοεῖν, which has its characteristic Biblical meaning. There is talk of conversion from a life without God to a life with the true God. The context and content of the speech have shown that Paul addresses “religious” Athenians who have rejected the true God, instead worshipping their own gods. Paul has shown that they are not addressing the true God in their idolatry. Paul has shown that the Athenians have various false conceptions of God. They are therefore called to turn away from their gods and to the true God.<sup>145</sup>

Paul bases the demand to convert on the fact that God has set a judgment, whereby he shall judge the entire world with justice. God is both the creator and judge.<sup>146</sup> Just as he has created everyone from one, he will one day judge everyone. This day will bring the end to his tolerance. God has not merely decided the day for the eschatological judgment; he has also decided who is to execute the judgment. Paul speaks about a man who God has decided will

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<sup>144</sup> Gärtner, *Areopagus*, p. 239-230.

<sup>145</sup> Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 219. Dibelius, *Areopagus*, p. 58, writes: “It is suggested, however, that repentance consists ultimately of recalling that knowledge of God which, by virtue of his nature, belongs to him.” If one interprets “ignorance” as ignorance about the true God, then conversion becomes cognitively thinking differently about God (e.g. Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte 2*, p. 243).

<sup>146</sup> Neyrey, *Acts 17*, p. 120, is of the opinion that the speech on the Areopagus is about “God’s providential action in the world, which includes theodicy.” Neyrey, *Acts 17*, p. 121, defines theodicy in the following manner: “The common point in Acts 17 and 23 is theodicy, a doctrine of three elements: (a) a divine judge, (b) survival of death/resurrection, and (c) postmortem retribution.” Neyrey, *Acts 17*, p. 124-126, writes that the speech includes these three elements and that it is particularly directed towards Epicureans as far as this is concerned. It is correct that the first point exists (a divine judge), but the next points are not found in the speech. In this speech, Paul does not proclaim that mankind will rise, but the call to conversion is directed to the living, and the speech about the judgment motivates this call. He is exclusively talking about the resurrection of Christ. Nor is Paul talking about recompense after death, but rather about a judgment over the living on account of their idolatry if they do not turn away from it.

execute the judgment: Jesus. This becomes apparent in the following, where Paul speaks of God having raised this man from the dead. But Paul does not mention his name. Paul proclaims a man who God has decided to be the eschatological judge. This requires evidence. This is the resurrection. The underlying idea is that the resurrection is a form of coronation, whereby Jesus takes the seat at his father's right hand and is instated as the ruler and eschatological judge.<sup>147</sup>

This brings the end to Paul's speech on the Areopagus. There has been some debate as to whether this is actually the end of the speech or whether Paul is interrupted. It is best to understand this as the conclusion. By referring to the man who is to be the judge and the resurrection, Paul is returning to his proclamation of Jesus and the resurrection (verse 18); though without actually mentioning the name of Jesus. Paul has defended himself. He does not proclaim two foreign gods, but rather the one true God, who has revealed himself to the Athenians; who they know but they have rejected. Jesus is not a god whom they can debate as to whether he should be included in their pantheon; rather, he is the man who God has decided beforehand is to be the eschatological judge. They cannot freely choose to relate to Jesus, as he will be their judge. Nor is the resurrection a god, but rather the decisive historic event that provides evidence that Jesus will be the eschatological judge.<sup>148</sup>

#### **8. Reaction to the speech (verses 32-34)**

Paul's speech receives a mixed reception. The speech about the resurrection triggers mockery from some and curiosity among others. The negative reaction again shows that the Athenians are not familiar with the God that Paul is proclaiming. Luke tells of how Paul leaves the assembly and that some joined him and came to believe.

#### **9. Summary**

I have analyzed the speech on the Areopagus with particular reference to the question pertaining to natural revelation, and I will now summarize the results. In the introduction to the speech, Paul ascertains that the Athenians are religious. This is not a compliment. The mockery from the philosophers, the reference to "Jesus" and "Anastasis" as foreign gods and their attempts at integrating them in a polytheistic understanding of the divine reveals their fundamental distance to the gospel. Their worship activity does not include Jesus. In the speech, Paul mentions the Athenians' ignorance of God, their false understanding of god with respect to the gods' temples,

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<sup>147</sup> Balch, *Speech*, p. 58-67, claims that there is similarity between a "Posidonian" perception of providence in history and the reference to the judgment here in Acts 17:31. However, Balch himself draws attention to the differences on p. 67. Posidonius describes that "providential consequences are immanent", while Luke operates with apocalyptic expectation.

<sup>148</sup> Stenschke, *Portrait*, p. 220.

needs and nature, and their distance to God, as he calls them to conversion. The Athenians' worship does not include God. Paul bases his speech on an altar with the inscription "to an unknown god". Paul uses this inscription as a kind of catapult in which to base his message and be cast out of. For in his speech, Paul loosens an "unknown god" from the Athenians' polytheistic and materialistic conceptions. He steps away from the original meaning of the inscription and uses "an unknown god" in a more abstract sense; Paul identifies this abstract "an unknown god" with the one true God. The context and the speech show that Paul does *not* identify one of the Athenians' concrete gods with the one and true God, for "an unknown god" is polytheistically understood as one among many other gods, and "an unknown god" is materialistically understood as a god who lives in temples, has needs that are met by people and can be produced from inanimate materials. The Athenians are to turn away from their "unknown god".

Paul proclaims "the unknown God" for them. This takes place over five steps. In the first step, Paul identifies "the unknown God" as the creator. The creation reveals God as creator. Paul includes an element drawn from natural revelation in his proclamation and re-reveals it. As the creator, God also reveals himself as the Lord of the heavens and the earth. He reveals himself as the God who can demand the obedience of mankind. As "Lord" over the heavens and the earth, he does not live in man-made temples.

In the second step, Paul identifies "the unknown God" as a God who is not served by human hands. Paul reasons that God has provided everyone with life, breath and everything (verse 25). This reveals God as the provider of life. Paul includes an element drawn from natural revelation in his proclamation and re-reveals it. As He who provides life and breath and everything, God also reveals himself as a God who is not served by human hands.

In the third step, Paul identifies "the unknown God" as creator and lord of history. God has created every people from one father (Adam). This reveals God as creator. God has determined specific periods for the peoples and has decided the limits for their habitation. The way God has steered history is revelation, and the purpose behind this revelation is that the peoples should seek God, i.e. acknowledge and worship God. Assessed on the background of God's revelation in creation, in his life-giving sustenance of everything and in history, this is a realistic purpose. But assessed on the basis of the idolatry of the people, it is unrealistic. The people have sunk into the ignorance of idolatry. The objective is *de facto* unattainable. On that background, "if they could possibly grope after him and find him" formulates an empty hope.



In the fourth step, Paul identifies “the unknown God” as a present God. God nearness is understood creation-theologically as God’s omnipresent creating, life-giving and sustaining activity.

In the fifth step, Paul again identifies “the unknown God” as the omnipresent giver and sustainer of life. “For by him we live and move and are” is understood creation-theologically as God’s omnipresent life-giving and sustaining activity. Paul compares this statement with a quote from the stoic Aratus: “for we are also his offspring.” This quote is about the god Zeus, who is understood in immanent-pantheistic terms as the force and world reason that penetrates and fills everything and which also permeates mankind. Paul gives the quote another meaning by placing it in a new context. He loosens it from the original stoic conceptions and gives it a theistic and creation-theological twist. The quote is now about the true God; he is understood in theistic-transcendent terms, and “descendant” is understood creation-theologically. The quote from Aratus expresses the same as that we live and move and are by him. With “descendant”, Paul formulates a similarity between mankind and God. This similarity refers to life. In verse 29, Paul uses “since we are God’s descendant” as reason not to believe that the divine is equal to anything that is dead (gold, silver or stone). “God’s offspring” thus means that we are living and in a state of dependence upon him, who is alive.

Paul concludes his speech with a call to conversion. Paul divides time in two epochs. He characterizes the first epoch as the “age of ignorance”, which is now the past. The second epoch is the age of the proclamation of conversion, which is the present for these Athenians. Ignorance refers to the Athenians’ idolatry and means that they are ignorant about the true God and their idolatry. The Gentiles are not ignorant about God, but instead they worship idols. “The age of ignorance” is an age in which God shows tolerance. God withholds the eschatological judgment (cf. Acts 14:16 and Romans 2:4). The speech about God’s tolerance is placed together with the natural revelation, and “tolerance” is thus an indirect element of the natural revelation. “The age of ignorance” is replaced by the age of the proclamation of conversion. “The age of conversion” is understood both in terms of salvation- and personal history. On the level of the history of salvation, a new age is ushered in by the death and resurrection of Christ. It is now the age of proclamation; also for the Gentiles. On the level of personal history, a new age is ushered in with the arrival of proclamation to the individual, to a group or a city.

The call to conversion is universal. There is talk of conversion from a life without God to the true God. Paul bases the call to conversion on the fact that God has set a day when he

will judge the entire world with justice. God is both the creator and judge. Paul speaks of God having decided upon a man who is to execute the judgment: Jesus. The speech concludes here.

## 10. Contextualization

The speech on the Areopagus is an example of contextualization. Paul has gone to the Areopagus and encounters a specific challenge: Is he proclaiming foreign gods? This challenge determines how Paul contextualizes his proclamation. I will start by describing three characteristic types of interpretation regarding contextualization in this proclamation. I will then proceed to describe my interpretation.

1) The Greek-Roman philosophy – Stoicism in particular – is the common platform for Paul and the listeners. In this philosophical tradition, Paul finds a contact point for the proclamation of the good news.<sup>149</sup> Losie writes: “If there was general revelation in the Greco-Roman world on which evangelistic preaching could draw, Christian missionaries like Paul would have their best chance of finding it in the considered work of philosophers.”<sup>150</sup> Losie understands verses 24-29 in the sense that “Paul lists what has been said by Greek philosophers about the ‘unknown god’.”<sup>151</sup> He reiterates Dibelius’ assessment: “what we have before us is a *hellenistic* speech about the true knowledge of God”, and writes “that the statement of facts in Paul’s speech (Acts 17:24-29) addresses the major points of Stoic beliefs.”<sup>152</sup> The quote from Aratus, the Stoic poet confirms as much. The conclusion is: “...we can see how clearly Paul’s speech on the Areopagus reflects the theological thinking of the Stoic philosophers.” “The speech on the Areopagus acknowledges the existence of general revelation and uses it as the basis for an evangelistic appeal. Ironically, the ‘unknown god’ is, in fact, the God who is known.”<sup>153</sup> As we have seen and will see, the contact point and the shared platform is not Stoic philosophy but rather natural revelation.

2) The speech includes both connection and opposition. Paul attempts to establish a shared point of reference with his listeners where possible, while at the same time criticizing the Athenians’ religious practice. Schnabel writes: “1. The elements of agreement are in the foreground in Paul’s Areopagus speech. He ‘picks up’ his listeners, among them Epicurean and Stoic

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<sup>149</sup> Losie, *Speech*, p. 225.

<sup>150</sup> Losie, *Speech*, p. 226. Losie uses “general revelation” differently than I do. He uses the term with respect to the knowledge of God found in the Stoic tradition, while I use “general revelation” or “natural revelation” about that which God has revealed about himself, and which does not necessarily have an impact or a correct impact in religion and philosophy.

<sup>151</sup> Losie, *Speech*, p. 228.

<sup>152</sup> Losie, *Speech*, p. 230.

<sup>153</sup> Losie, *Speech*, p. 232.

philosophers (Acts 17:18), where they are in terms of concepts and language.” With respect to accordance with the Stoics, Schnabel mentions:<sup>154</sup>

a) “The Stoics argued that the gods were immortal.”

b) “The Stoics discussed the gods in their plurality and diversity, but they also were able to speak of ‘god’ in the singular.”

c) “The Stoic concept of God was not so much personal as essentially pantheistic.”

The stoics will thus be able to interpret Paul’s statement in verse 28 pantheistically.

d) “The Stoics believed in divine providence.”

With respect to accordance with the Epicureans, Schnabel mentions:

a) “The Epicureans argued for the animated nature, immortality and bliss of God.

These are concepts and terms that Paul uses.”

b) “Epicureans believed that the knowledge of God is apparent, a function of human reason.”

c) “Epicureans argued that the gods do not live in temples that people had built.”

d) “The Epicureans rejected sacrifices for the gods, arguing that a god does not need human things.”<sup>155</sup>

These elements display the positive and inclusive aspect of the speech, where Paul can find points of contact in Stoic and Epicurean philosophy and where it is possible to talk about continuity between Biblical revelation and Gentile poets and philosophers. But there is also another aspect of the speech wherein Paul criticizes the Gentile religiosity.

a) “The reference to the ‘unknown god’ (Acts 17:23) can be understood as a contradiction to pagan religious convictions, seen in the horizon of Isaiah 45:15, 18-25.”

b) “Paul thinks it is doubtful whether they (i.e. the Gentiles) will indeed find God as God wishes.”

c) “Biblically trained ears could recognize in Paul’s comment that God ‘is not far from each one of us’ (Acts 17:27c) the conviction that Paul does not speak positively of the ‘nearness’ of pagans to God.”

d) “The quotation from Aratus in Acts 17:28 is not just an accommodation to the philosophical convictions of his audience; it ... can again be placed within the biblical horizon of the theology of creation.”

<sup>154</sup> Schnabel, *Mission*, p. 1396-1398.

<sup>155</sup> Schnabel, *Mission*, p. 1398.

e) “The critique of temples (Acts 17:24) is reminiscent not only of Epicurean arguments but also of the emphasis of the prophets that everything belongs to the one true God, the Lord (Isaiah 66:1-2).”

f) “The critique of sacrifices (Acts 17:5) also reminds the biblically informed reader of scriptural convictions and statements.”

g) “The critique of idols (Acts 17:29) is a clear indictment of the popular piety with which the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers had come to an arrangement.”<sup>156</sup>

The speech on the Areopagus includes both elements: connection and critique. As we have seen and will see, the connection is in natural revelation and only in secondary significance in Stoic and Epicurean philosophy. Schnabel over-emphasizes the positive elements while placing inadequate emphasis on the negative; and he does not set the positive elements in the fundamental opposition that is between Paul and the Stoics and Epicureans when it comes to the true God and the relationship to him. The Stoics and Epicureans do not know or worship the one true God.

3) The special revelation is the shared platform for Paul and the Athenians. In this model, there is no shared foundation beforehand between Paul and the Athenians. There is no shared fundamental religious perception, which Paul can build upon. He must first establish it, and does so via the proclamation. This is the model found in Stonehouse. He writes: “The facts are, however, that idolatry was the occasion of Paul’s activity in Athens, a particular form of idolatry formed the starting-point for his address before the Areopagus, and the proclamation of God as the sovereign Creator and Ruler of all was directed against idolatry. It established the impropriety of the worship which makes its gods dependent upon men’s handiwork ...”<sup>157</sup> As regards the Gentiles in Athens, he writes: “Their ignorance was a sinful ignorance which if persevered in could lead only to imminent judgment.”<sup>158</sup> As regards “quotations from the heathen poets,” Stonehouse writes: “But it may be observed at once that even these quotations are obviously introduced by Paul to support his principal argument as to the untenability of idolatry ... Paul roundly condemns what he observed as a religion of ignorance.”<sup>159</sup>

“When therefore Paul undertakes to inform the Athenians concerning the sovereign Creator and Judge, and declares that he is proclaiming to them that with regard to

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<sup>156</sup> Schnabel, *Mission*, p. 1399.

<sup>157</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 22.

<sup>158</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 22.

<sup>159</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 23.

which they had in a measure acknowledged ignorance, he sounds the characteristic apostolic note of divine authority. How far he is therefore from stressing supposedly common ground between himself and his pagan hearers! When he says that the state of the heathen was characterized by ignorance of the true God, and he himself boldly asserts his qualifications to provide them with true knowledge, he is accenting, rather than toning down, the antithesis between the pagan religiosity and the Christian religion ...

Paul remains on distinctly Christian ground in his positive affirmations ...” \_The God whom Paul proclaims the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth ... is not presented as a matter of fact *in this address* as one whose knowledge may be taken for granted or presupposed or even inferred from a study of the world and history. As has been stressed, Paul proclaims this God as one who is basically unknown to his hearers. Moreover, the appeal is not, at least not in verses 24-26, to natural revelation ... Rather the mood is the quite dogmatic one of special revelation associated with Paul’s own authoritative claims ... In so far as the testimony of nature may be in mind, however, Paul would have to be understood as concerned to interpret the natural revelation in terms of special revelations.”<sup>160</sup>

Formateret: Indrykning: Venstre: 2,3 cm

As we have seen and will see, the shared platform is not the special revelation but rather the natural revelation.

4) I will now proceed to account for my understanding, which can be gathered in the following points.

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

- The creator, who has created the heavens and earth
- Lord of the heavens and the earth, who demands the worship of mankind
- The life-giving

<sup>160</sup> Stonehouse, *Areopagus*, p. 24-26. Stenschke, *Portrait*, belongs to this model; this is indicated by two quotes (p. 212-213): “There was no natural knowledge or recognition of this God, his nature and worship; he was different from anything known to the audience. Even though God had not left himself without testimony (Acts 14:17), he remained unknown even to the Gentile intelligentsia. His testimony to himself was not recognised and appreciated, but perverted into idolatry.” “The true God, his nature and proper worship must be proclaimed *ab extra* from the very beginning and basics.”

- The creator, who has created the peoples
- The lord of history, who sets times and limits for the habitation of the peoples
- The present provider and sustainer of life
- The life-giving, who gives life, movement and existence
- The living, who cannot be produced in inanimate materials
- The tolerant, who withholds his judgment(indirectly)<sup>161</sup>

On the one hand, Paul proclaims the transcendent God, who stands over the creation as the creator and provider and sustainer of life; as the lord of creation and history; as the tolerant, who now withholds his judgment and as the eschatological judge. God is separated from the world. On the other hand, Paul proclaims the present God, who is actively present in the created world in his creative and life-giving activity, in his dominion over the created and history and in his tolerance (indirectly) with the age of ignorance. God is in the world via his activities and with his power. He is revealed through them. In the proclamation of the living God, Paul makes reference to natural revelation. This is dismissed by the peoples. They worshipped the empty idols instead of the living God. Paul therefore re-reveals elements drawn from the natural revelation of God.

a) Paul refers to the natural revelation, as it is the Athenians' revelation of God. They are not familiar with God's special revelation. But they know the revelation of the one true God in creation, in the existence of mankind, in history and through tolerance; and have knowledge of God, but they have repressed this knowledge. Paul re-reveals the natural revelation in order to give it strength and power in the hopes that the proclamation will be able to clear a path through the rejection and idolatry.

b) Paul refers to the natural revelation on account of the Athenians' polytheism. They worship many gods, and Paul must therefore proclaim that there is only one living God. A true monotheistic perception of God is the basis and precondition for being able to proclaim Jesus Christ.

c) Paul refers to natural revelation in order to be able to identify the one true God for the Athenians. He is the creator and the lord of creation; he is the one who provides life and existence; he is the lord of history; and he is tolerant. This identification is the basis for the call to turn to him. The call is based on God's character.

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<sup>161</sup> Paul also proclaims that God is the judge who will one day judge the world through Jesus, but this is not part of this natural revelation.

d) Paul refers to natural revelation in order to reveal God's history with the Athenians. In his proclamation to the Jews and God-fearers, Paul refers to God's history with Israel. He does not do so here, instead referring to God's history with the peoples, as he proclaims the one true God as their creator and lord, who gives them life and existence, who in his goodness sustains life, which has revealed himself in their history as lord, and has shown them tolerance by withholding his judgment. The one true God is their God. The aim of this revelation is to draw the listeners into God's story so they see themselves as part of it. Paul's proclamation provides them with the necessary interpretative framework to understand their existence as God's creations, which owe their existence to God, and to understand their experiences in history as the manifestations of God's care and dominion. Paul weaves their lives and experiences into the greater story with God as creator and lord. In God's story with them, they can see who God is and who they are themselves.

2) Paul's contextualization is determined by the challenge he meets. The question is raised: Is he proclaiming foreign gods? Paul's answer is that he proclaims the one true God, who has revealed himself for the Athenians and whom they know. But they have rejected him and replaced him with their gods; they do not know him in their worship. Their worship is ignorant of God. On account of this challenge, Paul's proclamation is a long proclamation of He who is God; and who in reality is their God, for he has a claim upon them.

3) Paul contextualizes this element of the proclamation of the good news in their polytheistic religiosity by calling them to convert from their idols to the one true God. Here, there is a clear element of confrontation. He rejects the Athenians' religiosity. He does not comment on any philosophical schools – only the Athenians' popular religiosity – and attacks all of the considerable aspects of this religiosity, which is mentioned in the context of the speech and in the speech itself.<sup>162</sup> Paul attacks

- their gods – they are not God (cf. the unknown God)
- their worshipping – they worship in an ignorant manner (cf. the unknown God they worship ignorantly)
- their temples and altars – they are not temples for God
- their sacrifices – God is not served by human hands
- their images of idols – God is not made of gold, silver or stone

4) Through his proclamation, Paul establishes a shared platform with the Athenians.

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<sup>162</sup> Cf. Barr, *Faith*, p. 32-33.

This is natural revelation. The Athenians are familiar with this, for God has revealed it for them in creation, in history and in human existence. But the Athenians have rejected this revelation. Because the Athenians have rejected this natural revelation, two perspectives are cast over the natural revelation. The one perspective is that this *is* the shared platform. The second perspective is that the natural revelation is *rejected* by the Athenians. On a cognitive and existential level, Paul and the Athenians share nothing in common as regards revelation. The same is the case with worship. Paul knows and worships the one true God. Athenians worship other gods, who in reality are not gods.

As regards the question of why Paul chooses to reveal the very elements of natural revelation that he takes up in his proclamation, we can find the answer in the purpose behind the speech and the Athenians' religiosity. Paul must defend himself against the accusation of proclaiming foreign gods and therefore chooses to proclaim the one true God, who is creator and lord of life, mankind and history. He proclaims the God, who as creator is their lord and as the lord of history is their lord. He proclaims the unknown God, though he is known. The Athenians' religiosity also decides Paul's choice of which elements of the natural revelation he proclaims. He proclaims aspects of God's being that confront the three essential elements of the Athenians' religiosity that we hear about: their many gods, their temples as God's residences with sacrifices and service and their images of idols. Paul therefore proclaims one God, the creator and lord of mankind – in contrast to their many gods. Paul therefore proclaims God as lord and life-giver, who cannot be limited to man-made temples and requires sacrifices, and Paul therefore proclaims the living God, who cannot be produced in inanimate materials. On the basis of natural revelation and in confrontation of the Athenians' religiosity, Paul further achieves the advantage that there are elements of his criticism that the Stoics in particular and to a lesser extent the Epicureans would agree with. These elements are put together in Paul and the Stoics and the Epicureans, each with their own conception of god and worldview. As regards different conceptions of God, which are revealed in natural revelation, there are both differences and similarities when comparing with the Athenians' religious conceptions:

- There are differences with respect to the Athenians' popular religiosity as regards the number of gods, the temples, need for sacrifices and idols
- There are similarities with respect to certain conceptions found among the Stoics and Epicureans



When using words such as “connection and opposition” or “continuity and discontinuity” about the relationship between Paul and the Athenians, they can easily veil the fundamental opposition, as though the individual elements within the two categories exist on the same level. They do not. As regards the question about the relationship to revelation and the one true God, there is a fundamental and total opposition, and the fundamental opposition also spreads to the religious conceptions about God so that the existing similarities are to be understood on the background of this fundamental opposition. In certain areas, Paul, the Stoics and Epicureans share the same conceptions about God/gods, but the same conceptions describe, respectively, the one true God and gods, which are not gods. The element of “connection” or “continuity” is placed into this fundamental opposition and total rejection of the Athenians’ gods.

### **11. The perspective on the revelation**

In the speech on the Areopagus, Paul teaches a number of elements drawn from natural revelation. This revelation is not understood as a proof of the existence of God, where man, using reason, can draw conclusions regarding the existence of God on the basis of the created or the order of creation and beauty etc. There is no trace of such thinking in the speech. We search in vain for logical argumentation and deduction. The natural revelation is *revelation*, as God reveals himself and some of his attributes through his activities. God’s actions *are* revelation. The natural revelation is a real – as opposed to hypothetical – revelation. In the speech on the Areopagus, Paul proclaims a revelation of God. As already mentioned, I use “revelation” in the objective sense,<sup>163</sup> and “revelation” refers to God having revealed himself in his creation, in history and in the existence of mankind. It is implicit that the people know God, such as he has revealed himself. They know God as creator and lord, as lifegiver and the lord of history and as the tolerant (indirectly). There is knowledge of God. Paul also proclaims that the people have rejected the revelation and knowledge of God. In the speech on the Areopagus, Paul does not specify what comes of the knowledge of God after the people have rejected him and have become involved in idolatry. However, Paul emphasizes that there is a continual revelation and therefore also a present revelation, and as Paul assumes that revelation of God is equated with knowledge of God in verses 26-27, indicating that we cannot speak of a lost revelation or lost knowledge, after the people have rejected the revelation. The knowledge is then repressed.

We find fundamentally the same perspective on natural revelation in Romans 1:18-32. Here, Paul describes the existence of an objective revelation of God: God has revealed himself

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<sup>163</sup> See note 1.

through his works (Romans 1:20). Similarly, there is knowledge of God, so that mankind knows God as he has revealed himself through his works (Romans 1:21 and 1:18). This knowledge is rejected by mankind (Romans 1:21-23), but lives on intact but in repressed form in mankind (Romans 1:18). Romans 1:18-32 confirms that we can speak about the knowledge of God and about the suppression of this knowledge in the speech on the Areopagus. On the Areopagus, Paul proclaims that God reveals himself in his creation and sustaining (life), in history and existence of mankind, and we can summarily use this to specify what Paul means by God revealing himself through his works (Romans 1:20). In as much as God reveals himself in history and the existence of mankind as the life-giver, we can use this to supplement the conception of God in Romans 1:18-32. God also reveals himself as the lord of history and as the good God, who shows compassion to people by keeping them alive. In Paul's proclamation on the Areopagus, we receive the fundamentally same perspective on natural revelation as in Romans 1:18-32.

On the Areopagus, Paul proclaims natural revelation and includes part of the natural revelation in the special revelation. Paul thus confirms natural revelation. It is remarkable that in this re-revelation of natural revelation, Paul uses an OT-quote and several OT phrases in his description of the living God. Paul thus implicitly identifies the unknown God, who has revealed himself in creation and sustenance, in history and the existence of mankind, with the God that has revealed himself for Israel as the creator, provider and sustainer of life and as the lord of history. The one true God is described in the same way as he has revealed himself for Israel via the prophets.<sup>164</sup> Paul thus implicitly builds a bridge to the GT as revelation of God.

## **12. The perspective on the idols**

Particularly as regards the perspective on idols, it has often been argued that the speech on the Areopagus is at odds with Romans 1:18-32. The opposition between the two first appears if one believes that Paul identifies "an unknown god" with God and interprets God's tolerance with "the age of ignorance" as an expression of a mild and tolerant perspective on idolatry. This is owing to their ignorance about God. It is therefore excused. This stands in contrast to Paul's judgment over the idolatry in Romans 1. As we have seen, however, this interpretation of the speech on the Areopagus does not hold. Idolatry is not a *praeparatio evangelica*, as the Athenians worship their gods instead of God; as Paul does not identify "an unknown god" with God; as God's tolerance means that God withholds his judgment; and as the ignorance refers to their ignorance about God in their idolatry. In as much as there is an accessible revelation of God, and in as much as there is

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<sup>164</sup> Obviously the idea here is that natural revelation only reveals some aspects of God's existence and being; not all of them.

knowledge of God and experience with Him (in history and in their existence) among the Athenians, the worship of their gods can only be understood as a rejection of God. The idols are replacements for God, and idolatry occurs instead of honoring and worshipping the living God. This corresponds to the perspective on the idols in Romans 1:18-32. According to Romans 1:21-23, mankind rejects God, who they have known through his works, and they replace God with idols. The idolatry stands for an uproar against God. In Paul's proclamation on the Areopagus, we receive the fundamentally same perspective on idols and idolatry as in Romans 1:18-32.

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