

# Jews and Greeks

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Date: 17 July 2017

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] To have your Bibles open at Acts chapter 17. I make no apology for starting my sermon with a quote from Epimenides because that's pretty much what Paul does.

! So what's good enough for Paul is good enough for me, I think. Cretans always lie. Why? So arguably, you may not be aware of this, it's one of the most important statements in logic and philosophy.

I should say it's not a racist comment, of course, because Epimenides was himself a Cretan. And it has very much, actually, a relevance to Paul's message in Acts 17 and what we're going to be thinking about tonight and to gospel preaching.

It was quoted more in its moral context by Paul in Titus 1.12. But what we're going to be looking at tonight is perhaps more its philosophical meaning, its importance in philosophy in one sense.

So in one sense, we are going to, you're going to have to think tonight. It's going to be a bit philosophical because that's what Paul's argument is in Acts 17.

[1:25] It's a bit philosophical. And yet, in another sense, what we're doing is exactly the same as Chris was talking and reminding us to do this morning, which was to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

And so we pray that that might happen as we begin to think about Paul's address to the Athenians and the rest of this chapter. Chapter 16, verse 9, Paul has the vision of the man from Macedonia who invites him to come over to Macedonia, to Greece, to Europe.

And actually, this turns out to be more than just a geographical change. It marks a cultural change also. Luke leads us into it rather carefully.

So we read about the recruitment of his missionary organization of various, what one might call half-Jews. Timothy, remember, whose father was a Greek.

Lydia, a businesswoman, who's a God-fearer, but we're not even told whether she was actually Jew at all. And we read in chapter 16 the conversion of the Philippian jailer, who was probably a Roman.

[2:43] Or certainly not a Jew. And all these things actually point towards a refocusing of the mission that Luke is leading us into.

So I've said this sermon will perhaps be rather more academic and philosophical than usual, because Paul's discussion with the Athenians is academic and philosophical. And I don't think it's an accident that Luke records Paul's address to the Oropagus in more detail than he does most of Paul's words.

The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 had established the importance of the mission base in Gentile Antioch, with a different sort of culture to the Christian church in Jerusalem under the leadership of James the Elder.

And all these things point towards a radical change in missionary strategy. And yet as we move into the first part of chapter 17, it looks almost as though it's going to be business as usual.

Because Paul goes back to the synagogue. And really the final break doesn't happen until chapter 19, 9, when Paul finds himself excluded from the synagogues and instead hires a lecture hall for his discourses.

[4:10] But the address to the Oropagus in chapter 17, 21 to 34, is actually critical. Because it's here, really, that Paul sets out a missionary strategy to the Gentiles.

He constructs, as we might say, an entirely different apologetic. What does apologetic mean? Well, an apologetic has nothing to do with being sorry.

It's to do with setting out logically and rationally why Christianity is true, why the message is true, and why it is relevant to the people who are hearing it.

And as I say here, Paul constructs an entirely groundbreaking and new apologetic. Although the apologetic is different, you notice that the core message is the same.

The message is still, repent for judgment in the shape of a resurrected Christ. He's coming. Verse 31. The message is not changed, but the way it's delivered is certainly changed to a different audience.

[5:23] And so we want to understand how this might be relevant to us. And to do that, I think we need to understand a bit about the context in which this happened. And both, really, the political context and the intellectual context in which this happened.

And so I'm going to look briefly at the political context, Jews and Romans. I had planned to say a bit more about this, but we can come back to that later in the later chapters. So I'll just summarize that very quickly.

We'll say a bit more about the intellectual context of the Athens and the Greek, and Greek learning. And then, finally, we'll think, well, 2,000 years later, does this have any relevance to us now?

So let's say just a little bit about the political context. And Luke, actually, in his writings, has quite a positive view of the Pax Romana, the Roman peace.

You notice how the Jews wanted to get rid of Jesus, but the Romans just, they did arrest him, but then they just put him on bail and let him out again. The Roman peace restricted mob rule.

[6:38] It, to some extent, actually defended freedom of speech in some ways. It maintained law and order over a large area, and it opened borders.

Very importantly, Paul had no problem in crossing formation minor into Europe because the borders were open. And, in fact, it's worth noting that the Roman Empire opened borders over a much wider area than the Schengen Agreement does in present Europe.

Open borders were important for being able to preach freely. Of course, things would change. The emperor at the time of these events was Claudius, and, as I say, he was relatively sane by the standards of Roman emperors at the time.

His predecessor was Caligula, and his successor was Nero. And, of course, Nero later on would start blaming Christians for his own failure, and then there was persecution.

But at this time, Roman law was largely seen as a friend, I think. And nationalism wasn't particularly fashionable in most of the Roman Empire, but there were a few places where it was.

[7:51] About ten years after these events, of course, right out on the barbarian fringes, Boudicca would burn London. But in Judea, of course, there were any number of nationalist messianic sects, all with their own plan for revolution and throwing off the Roman rule.

But, of course, they all hated each other pretty much as much as they hated the Romans, so they never achieved very much and, of course, eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem itself. So, certainly, as far as Luke is concerned here, the open borders, the rule of law, were important things for the spread of the gospel, even though sometimes they did, of course, cause difficulties.

But we'll come back to that in later chapters where Paul interacts more with the Roman authorities. Let's think instead about the intellectual context.

Paul is in Athens, of course, the great university city, the city of the Greek philosophers. But actually, the reality was that the heyday of Athens was actually long past.

You sense Paul's disappointment, don't you, in verse 16? It's almost as if we might go, say, to Cambridge or to Harvard, expecting to be involved in lots of philosophical, intellectual debate and finding instead that people are just messing about in the river and getting drunk in the pubs.

[9:28] One senses actually some disappointment in Paul. Paul was obviously, from this chapter, well-educated in Greek learning as well as Hebrew learning. Athens was, of course, still an important university city, but its heyday was over.

I put some dates up there and the ones that are particularly relevant to our chapter here I put in red. The founder, really, or the beginning, at least, of the Greek for the golden age, as it's sometimes called, was around 600 BC with Thales and Pythagoras.

And Epimenides was also, although we don't know a great deal about his life, was also wrote around that time. He was a contemporary of Pythagoras. The great philosophers, of course, Plato and Aristotle, wrote around 427.

Well, Plato was born in 427. Aristotle, a generation later, in 384. The two philosophers, or the philosophical schools that are mentioned in our passage here, the Epicureans and the Stoics, dates from about 300 years before the time of Paul.

Epicurus was born in 341 and Zeno, of Citrium, who founded the Stoic school, was born in 334. So, these debates that they were still having at the time of Paul were already 300 years old.

[11:09] the second quotation that Paul has is actually, if you have an ESV margin, it says it's from a poem by a Greek poet, Aretas, who again was born in around 310 BC.

And the end of the Greek Golden Age was really usually assumed to be with the death of Archimedes in 212 BC. But of course, he wasn't in Athens anyway.

He lived in Syracuse. So, the debates that's between, as I say, between the Epicureans and the Stoics were already 300 years old by the time Paul came to Athens.

There would be a later flowering of Greek thought, but that would be focused in Alexandria rather than in Athens. and that would end with the murder of Hypatia, which was an object lesson all of its own, but we can't go there this evening.

Fascinating woman, Hypatia, there. So, Paul is in a city that's noted for its rationalist philosophers. Both Epicurus and Zeno were materialists.

[12:27] And the Greek philosophers, as opposed to the practical sort of everyday religion of the Greeks, did incline towards a kind of monotheism.

Or, well, right, atheism. It's debatable whether Epicurus and Zeno may well actually have been atheists. But they certainly were no supporters of the popular Greek religion.

And so, actually, there's a certain irony in the desire of people in Athens to hear new ideas in verse 21. There was a time when, of course, the new ideas were in Athens to start with.

That's where they originated. But now they were coming in from outside because there was a death of homegrown ideas. And it's worth just looking at verse 4 and verse 12 because you note there that actually many Greeks were quite attracted to Jewish monotheism.

and rejected the moral ambiguity and the pantheism of the Greco-Roman gods. They weren't so much attracted to Jewish nationalism but to Jewish monotheism there was an interest in it.

[13:48] It seemed to be a better sort of religion than the Greeks own one. And so it's into this intellectual environment that Paul comes.

And Paul's apologetic as I say is groundbreaking. So the Jews we notice in the first section of the chapter and Jewish sympathizers Jesus is presented as the Messiah but not the Messiah of the nationalist sects but rather a Messiah who must suffer and rise from the dead not to lead a nationalist revolt but rather to call people to the reign of the Prince of Peace.

But when he goes to the Oropagus he takes a radically different line and it's worth picking out the main points of it I think in some detail. So let's have a look at it in a bit of detail.

Verse 23 he notes that the Athenian religion is searching for something the unknown god. There's gods everywhere in Athens. They said there was a temple on every corner in ancient Athens and yet these gods were not quite doing the job.

There was a desire for something missing a temple to an unknown god and it's even been suggested that that idea came from Epimenides as well though it's somewhat unproven.

[15:25] And so Paul comes to Stasis 7 by saying he'd been accused in verse 18 of propagating foreign gods but he comes and says no not a foreign god but the unknown god whose temple is already in your city he is the one who I'm proclaiming to you.

And then verses 24 to 26 really very different from the way he spoke to Jews because rather than Jewish nationalism and messianic hope he focuses on an international perspective he wants to make the point that man made gods will not do it's the unknown god who made peoples and nations and therefore gives peoples and nations a legitimate existence and boundaries and culture he is the god that Paul wants to proclaim it's a very internationalist view and then he goes on in verses 27 and 28 to say well why did God do this and he says the real purpose of nations is actually to seek

God and the reference to

Greek thought suggests that that actually made some progress in that direction is suggested by the quotations in him we live and move and have our being you wouldn't argue with that would you he is close to each of us you wouldn't argue with that either and that was the bait then that he's not saying this is something foreign that I'm bringing to you he's saying this is actually what you've been looking for all along so that was the bait but now comes the hook in verse 29 and the hook is that that quest for God had actually failed as I said these debates were three or four or five hundred years old the latest quote from Aratus was at least 250 years old and in fact the whole point of what he's saying is that Athens had fallen back into idolatry and worship of gods and goddesses who were morally bankrupt that this quest for god had failed so why did it fail verse 30 it failed because of ignorance not just idolatry but because of ignorance but there is a moral reason for this ignorance man should have found god but had failed to do so to a university city that prides itself on wisdom and knowledge

Paul comes along and says that actually you're ignorant and not just ignorant but you're culpably ignorant they need to repent and indeed those very poets and philosophers they revere witness against them in this sense because they have actually turned away even from the light that they've had and then verse 31 since men and women had failed to reach out to God God decided you better do something about that and he had reached out to men but he reaches out as the righteous judge not as the amoral manipulators of the Greek and Roman pantheon you read the stories of the ancient Greek gods don't you and they're worse than us they're worse than humans they're completely morally bankrupt and that is why there was even at the time an attraction towards the Jewish God so that's the bait and the hook and now we get the strike the moral bankruptcy of Greek religion many would actually be prepared to accept the Stoics and even the Epicureans has said as much there's no problem with a theoretical future judgment we can all say yeah that's a good thing there's not even a problem with the idea of resurrection as an abstract concept that is an idea that was kind of around in Greek philosophy but Paul renches these ideas out of the debating hall and into the marketplace into the political arena he preaches not an abstract idea of resurrection but an actual physical event time he says the times of ignorance God overlooked but now it's all different because it's all different because there's no excuse for that ignorance now at an actual time in history at an actual place that his hearers at the least heard of and quite likely been to an actual person

[20:51] Jesus of Nazareth whose birth and death are recorded was resurrected and this is the proof that that other day he mentions that the day of judgment that that will be a real event in real history too that's why he links the two things together the resurrection a real resurrection in real time in real space in real history necessarily changes your world view forever this becomes the dividing line this says it's the time to stop talking and debating and to close your mind on something stop debating and start repenting how are Paul's words received?

pretty much as one might expect a few people sneered mocked of course the general academic reaction is what academics usually do of course it was to hold it at arm's length in verse 32 and say yeah we'll go away and think about this but really that's just a rejected as much as sneering isn't it? unlike the Jews they won't jump one way or the other they don't reject it outright but they exclude action in favour of more talking this is academia at its worst and I speak as one who spent most of his well all of his working life in academia so I know what it's like but there are those who do indeed repent and believe so that was 2000 years ago there aren't many Stoics or Epicureans around nowadays you might think although actually there are people who teach pretty much the same thing so does this have any relevance to us?

well certainly we live in the same slightly ambiguous relation to the law and civil authority and again Paul perhaps Luke deals with that in a few later chapters but it's the world of ideas that we really need I think to learn from Paul because it seems that Epicurus has won the debate the philosophy of today is very much each drink and be merry for tomorrow we die the world has forgotten that older philosopher Epimenides in God we live and move and have our being Paul's well then Epimenides seems to have been Paul's favourite Greek philosopher because he quotes him at least twice and possibly three times that other quotation is the one we started with what we now call

Epimenides paradox Cretans always lie and that's actually crucial why is it crucial why do we call it Epimenides paradox well because of course Epimenides was a Cretan so if Cretans always lie this statement is a lie and therefore Cretans do not always lie the statement contradicts itself and actually any attempt to construct meaning without God ultimately falls foul of Epimenides paradox self-reference is self-destructive it has to be so one could just list modern ways of thinking post-moderns assert there is no absolute truth and they assert that as an absolute truth rationalists assert that all is logic but they can't justify that statement logically in fact there is a mathematical theorem called Gödel's theorem which asserts that numbers cannot be reduced to logic

[25:05] I won't go into the details it's a highly technical proof but in the end it comes down to Epimenides paradox it turns out that if you try and do it you land up in self-contradiction positivists assert that only truth is empirical truth but they can't produce any empirical evidence for that statement and of course the prevailing view now is political correctness how contradictory that is it tries to construct a moral code based on tolerance and freedom and what does it do it ends up being intolerant self-centered and bigoted and collapses under the weight of its own contradictions now philosophers of course are some extent aware of these problems but if we do not find meaning in God we will not find it anywhere anything else is just a rage against the dying of the light and that's futile so philosophy says basically you take your pick stoic or epicurean you bear up under the intolerable despair which is what

Nisha proposed of course or you fight it off with parties which is the epicurean solution but don't think you can win either way eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die there's no meaning what is it Paul adds to this discussion it's not just the self contradiction is it it's the moral dimension men and women says Paul are not just ignorant but they are willfully culpably ignorant Paul writes in Romans 118 they willfully suppress the truth that all of us are not just logically inconsistent but we're ethically inconsistent as well and indeed that original state quote

I started with that Cretans lie always lie is double barbed isn't it it says that we're always logically inconsistent but it also of course lying is a bad thing it is morally inconsistent as well and Paul says those things are really the same it is not actually an intellectual failure to find God it is a moral failure to find God is this moral dimension plausible and the Epicurean and Stoics would say no and the Europagites weren't convinced either many people today in the west at least would also answer no but what proof does Paul have to offer what we've already said isn't it it's the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth in a real time in a real place in real history we cannot afford to abandon that some

Christian apologists have tried to do so but do that and the whole thing falls apart you land up in self contradiction like the rest of the world not some abstract philosophical idea of resurrection that won't do a real fact about a real person who will execute a judgment embedded in real history and as we see from verse 34 in the last you should believe it or you don't but Paul reminds us often the fact is well attested it's recorded by careful historians like Luke and most historians have looked at the writings of Luke have noted his how what a careful historian he is how he is very careful to check his facts and so on they were observed by faithful witnesses!

they had nothing much to gain and in fact a lot to lose if they were lying the witnesses who were tested to have seen the risen Christ and as Paul told the Greek philosophers the resurrection of Jesus changes everything because there's no longer an excuse for suppressing the truth so that's the message we have to take to the world well to ourselves first but then to the world believe it or if you don't believe it you sign up for a moral vortex you sign up for a worldview that is going nowhere that is going down the plug hole as we might say and you've got to see it all around us how many different philosophies people have tried to produce in the last two or three hundred years since the enlightenment and now they've all come a cropper in exactly the same way because they're all self contradictory without the presence of

[30:33] Jesus Christ without the God in whom we live and move and have our being nothing makes sense you can't know anything so that's the choice you sign up for the resurrection of Jesus Christ or you take the epicurean solution eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die the resurrection of Jesus solves both the intellectual and the moral problem

so let's sing a hymn about that the the thing!