

## Cities of the New Testament: Athens

### ἀγνώστῳ θεῷ

This is the eleventh in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on the cities of the New Testament. Previous installments have been Corinth (ET&N 23), Ephesus (28), Laodicea (33), Antioch (40), Rome (53), Alexandria (60), Lystra (63), Tarsus (68), Puteoli (74), and Caesarea (82). The purpose of the series is to examine the history, geography, religion, culture, and people of each city and to consider how they relate to us today. Additional installments of this series will discuss Nicopolis, Colossae, Thessalonica, Philippi, Perga, Troas, and Arimethea. Additional cities may be added.

I originally scheduled this issue as #85 (October 17), but I wanted to relate my wonderful experiences in Athens right away - see the "Now" section.

### Then



A composite panorama of the view from the Areopagus Hill in Athens. Photograph © Richard M. Soule

When Paul visited Athens in 51 A.D, the city that was once the greatest in the Mediterranean world was past its prime, supplanted by Rome, Ephesus, Antioch, and even nearby Corinth, but it was far from insignificant. Famous philosophers continued to be nurtured and educated in Athens, but Greece was no longer the superpower it had been several centuries earlier. In some ways, the biblical account of Paul's visit almost seems like a footnote. After Paul received the Macedonian call while in Troas (Acts 16:9-10), Paul and his growing entourage, which now included Luke, booked passage to Neapolis and continued to Philippi (the subject of a future installment of the *ET&N* Cities of the New Testament). From there, they traveled to Thessalonica, where Paul's testimony of Jesus as the Messiah incited some Jews, and the brothers were forced to spirit Paul and others on to Berea (Acts 17:5-10).

But the infuriated Thessalonian Jews followed Paul to Berea, forcing him to move on once again (Acts 17:13-14). He left Timothy and Silas in Berea and was taken by sea to Athens, where the Berean brothers took leave. At this point, Paul appears only to be accompanied by Luke and Aristarchus, who would remain with Paul for years but was not, at this point, among of Paul's closest associates. Despite the Jewish opposition in Thessalonica and Berea, Luke reports that Paul's evangelistic efforts in those cities were generally successful: "*And some of [the Thessalonian Jews] were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women*" (Acts 17:4) and "*Many of [the Berean Jews] therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men*"

(Acts 17:12). It must have come as a major disappointment, therefore; that Paul's mission to Athens met with considerably less success:

*"Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols." (Acts 17:16).*

It appears that perhaps Paul had not intended to preach in Athens and only decided to do so as he saw the idolatry in the city. While Athens was past its prime, it was still a major city, and it is curious that Paul may have been hesitant. Of course, Paul was very much under the control of the Holy Spirit, which is why he had gone to Europe in the first place. The fact that the key members of his mission team, Timothy and Silas, were not with him in Athens may be a major contributing factor. In addition, perhaps even someone as fervent as Paul was a bit shell-shocked after having been hustled out of both Thessalonica and Berea because of opposition.

*"So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, 'What does this babbler wish to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities'--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.' (v. 17-18).*



Athens agora (marketplace) as seen from Mars Hill. © 2006 Richard M. Soule

While Paul followed his usual pattern of preaching in the synagogue, the Jewish community in Athens appears to have been quite small, so in this case, he turned his attention to local Greek intelligentsia. Epicureanism and Stoicism were not the only philosophical camps in existence in Athens and the Roman world at the time, but Epicureans and Stoics may have been interested in Paul's teaching because of his belief in being content in any situation. Epicurus, the founder of the philosophical school named after him, and Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, both lived around 300 B.C. Epicurus taught that the goal of life was happiness and that happiness could only be attained by wanting nothing. Similarly, Zeno advocated moderation in all things. While they may have found some common ground with Paul's Christian message of self-denial, but they obviously parted company with him in other doctrinal areas.

*"And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." (v. 19-21).*

Luke's parenthetical remark about Athenians may simply reflect his own opinion, but it is also likely that it may have been shared by Paul after his experiences there. Paul experienced limited success in Athens, and he probably tired quickly of the philosophers who solicited his teaching only out of idle curiosity. For Paul, the purpose of any philosophy, including Christianity, was transformation. He would have had little patience for those who simply listened in order to amuse themselves or

increase their information about various philosophies. Lacking action based on convictions, any philosophy would be worthless to Paul.



Mars Hill, site of the Areopagus, as seen from the Acropolis. © 2006 Richard M. Soule

*"So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (v. 22-23).*

Of the examples preserved in the New Testament, Jesus and Paul were experts at putting their messages in contexts to which their hearers could relate. Jesus' parables, sometimes obscure in our modern context, were masterful stories that incorporated

everyday events in the lives of first century Judeans. In Athens, Paul uses the idolatry that "provoked" his spirit to get the attention of Greek philosophers. The petty gods of the Greeks and Romans, with their all-too-human propensities for jealousy, deceit, and violence, were fashioned as knowable deities, but some (including the Stoics) posited a supreme being or "first source." This they considered unknowable, but Paul was there to tell them otherwise.

The Areopagus had once been a great court of Athens, (and once the site of a temple to the god Ares/Mars) but by Paul's time it was no longer an important governmental institution. Nevertheless, it retained some traditional respect and became a place where philosophers seem to have exchanged and evaluated competing world views. It was the perfect place, as both a meeting place of thinkers and a foundation of pagan worship, for Paul to preach the Gospel.

*"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring." (v. 24-28).*

Paul's poetic quote, "For we are indeed his offspring," comes from Aratus ("Phaenom.," v. 5), a well-known poet from Paul's home province of Cilicia, perhaps even from Tarsus. Again, this is a wonderful example of Paul's broad education, as well as his ability to relate to his audience. When we consider how well-versed Paul was in Jewish history and the Torah, as well as the contemporary Greco-Roman culture, we gain a greater appreciation of just how perfect a choice he was to serve as God's appointed apostle to the Gentiles. Few, if any, men of his time could so thoroughly bridge the gap between the divergent Roman and Jewish cultures. Even though Rome tolerated Judaism because of its antiquity, most considered Judea a backwater, troublesome province. It is clear from Jewish, Christian, and Roman writings that the problems between Rome and the Jews/Christians stemmed primarily from a total lack of understanding for one another.

*"Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this'" (v. 29-32).*

While a life of self-denial would have been acceptable to the Greek mind, the idea of resurrection and an afterlife was almost totally foreign. Paul may have piqued the interest of a few, although those who wanted to hear more may just have been curious, and it seems certain that the mockers were among a distinct majority, proving that things haven't changed much in two thousand years. These ideas, while no longer novel in our time, are still substantial stumbling blocks for those who insist that the supernatural does not exist.

*"So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (v. 33-34).*

In contrast to Luke's reports about Thessalonica and Berea, where many were converted through Paul's message, only "some" believed in Athens - probably no more than a handful. We know nothing further definitively of the two named converts, although some pseudonymous literature of the fifth century was later falsely attributed to Dionysius. He is also sometimes identified with a French martyr and the first bishop of Paris. Eusebius reports that Dionysius became the first bishop of Athens (*Church History* IV.3). Some later writers identify Damaris and Dionysius' wife, but Luke's wording makes this seem unlikely.

The primary question that arises from Paul's experience in Athens centers on his apparent hesitancy to preach there. Paul was certainly seldom if ever reserved about much of anything - he is almost defined by his single-minded zealotry for his current cause. Furthermore, his ministry focused on major cities and Athens, even though its glory had faded, was certainly still one. On the other hand, Paul was also a realist and he seems to have recognized that a critical mass of Jews, who could more readily understand (if not always accept) his message because of their familiarity with the messianic prophecies, was essential to his evangelistic efforts. While there were Jews in Athens, there may simply not have been enough in Paul's view.

More important, however, by this time in his ministry, Paul must have recognized how polarizing he could be, and that he could not do it alone. He may have considered Silas' simple faith and Timothy's milder personality (see 2 Timothy 1:5-8) as critical counterpoints to his own approach. He had been driven out of Thessalonica and Berea, but he had sent Silas and Timothy back there, indicating that he believed they would have greater success in strengthening the embryonic church without his presence. In short, his buffer - both spiritually and perhaps physically - was not in Athens. That he departed quickly when he began to see significant opposition (as evidenced by the mockers), suggests that he understood he could not hope to successfully evangelize Athens by himself.

If true, this understanding of Paul is highly instructive to ministry/missionary teams today. People respond to different things. Some undoubtedly responded to Paul's unequivocal preaching; others may have responded better to gentle service by

someone like Timothy. Today's evangelistic efforts, then, must be conducted by teams that represent a broad spectrum of spiritual gifts. Paul wanted to save everyone he could, but he knew he needed others. This may be part of the problem with segments of Christianity that are now dominated by individual strong personalities. Like Paul, they may repel at least as many people as they attract.

## Now

As I write this portion on August 25, I have just returned from a remarkable day touring parts of southern Greece. I flew here Sunday/Monday for a conference at the Athens Hilton, which was originally supposed to run Tuesday-Thursday but was reduced to Wednesday-Thursday, so I took a bus tour on Tuesday to Cape Sounion southeast of Athens to see the Temple of Poseidon. It was a long hot bus ride for a so-so ancient attraction. Today couldn't have been more different! I bit the financial bullet and hired a taxi for the day. We drove to the Corinthian Canal, Kechries (ancient Cenchrea), Epidaurus, Mycenae, and Corinth before returning to Athens and the Acropolis. But it was not really the destinations that made the day remarkable - it was my driver.



Michael Sterianos at Cenchrea (Kechries).  
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Michael Sterianos met me in his comfortable Mercedes cab at eight this morning and immediately told me that he was excited when he read in my e-mail that I wanted to visit ancient Christian sites because he too is a Christian. He and his family are members of the Free Apostolic Church of the Pentecost, an independent group of churches begun in Greece in 1964. While they are pentecostal (holy spirit baptism and gifts, particularly glossolalia), they are not part of other Pentecostal Churches. During our wonderful conversation throughout the day, we discovered a great deal of common ground with the church of Christ of which I am a

member. Each Free Apostolic Church of the Pentecost is autonomous with elders and deacons, their congregational music is non-instrumental, they practice weekly communion and believers' water baptism, and they believe firmly in following the Bible in all things. This was more than enough common ground to ignore any differences. Michael did urge me to pray to receive the Holy Spirit, by which he meant receiving the miraculous manifestation of charismatic gifts. While I believe the Holy Spirit indwells the believer at the time of water baptism, I remain interested in the charisma and may just follow his advice.

We found another point of commonality in our families. Both of us have daughters who have left their families. The situations are very different, but we both grieve for the loss. The entire experience reinforced my hope that committed Christians can focus our their shared beliefs rather than our fundamentally inconsequential differences.

Besides finding a new brother in Christ (and the newest ET&N subscriber), the highlight of the day was, of course, Corinth itself. I wrote about Corinth in the first ET&N Cities of the New Testament issue (ET&N 23), but I had to borrow pictures. I have now replaced most with pictures I took today. To stand before the bema where Paul was charged, to stroll past the shops where he made tents with Aquila and

Prisca, to view the Erastus stone; indeed, the almost certainly have walked on ground where Paul did 1,950 years ago was a indescribable experience. I only wish my wife had been with me. She would have enjoyed talking with Michael and seeing the sites, but she is still in Seattle with our daughter Andrea, her husband Aaron, and our new grandson. The last stop of the day was at the Acropolis of Athens, where I climbed the famously slippery steps to the Aeropagus Hill, where Paul addressed the elite thinkers of the city. The steps have been worn over the years so that they are almost like walking on ice, even in the hot dry August sun. It was 42° Celsius (106° Fahrenheit) the day I arrived, but "only" about 37° C (99° F) today and there was a pleasant breeze on the Acropolis Hill. An alternative set of metal steps have now been constructed adjacent to the rocks. Again, standing somewhere very near where Paul addressed the Athenians was awesome, and the view from the hill is truly magnificent. The montage below shows a 180° view from the top of the Aeropagus Hill.

The only real moment of sadness I felt today was when Michael told me that on a typical Sunday, only about 250,000 Greeks attend church services in a country with a population of about thirteen million. But if the enthusiastic faith of Michael Sterianos is symptomatic of his church, there is genuine hope for the future of the gospel in this area that represents an important foundation of the original first century church.

By the way, if any of you are planning a trip to Athens (something I heartily recommend), you can hire Michael's taxi services cheaper than I did since I went through his parent company by contacting him by e-mail - msterianos[at]yahoo.com (replace the [at] with the symbol). You won't regret it!

## Discussion [\(Caesarea\)](#)

Comments posted on the [ET&N](#) blog at [blog.peculiarpress.com](http://blog.peculiarpress.com)



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

## **NEXT ISSUE: Apocryphal Apocalypses (Sept 19)**

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