
a *Grace Notes* course

The Acts of the Apostles

an expositional study
by Warren Doud

Lesson 308: **Acts 17:10-21**

ACTS, Lesson 308, Acts 17:10-21

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Acts 17:10-21**Acts 17:10**

And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming there went into the synagogue of the Jews.

Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke left town right away. That their escape was by night shows that they were in hiding and in real danger.

Paul's work in Thessalonica had been very effective, the church there grew into one of the strongholds of Christianity, as is clear when we read 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Two Christian men from Thessalonica, Aristarchus and Secundus, accompanied Paul to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4), and Aristarchus went with him to Rome Acts 27:2).

Berea was about 60 miles from Thessalonica, about three days' travel. Although the churches there are not mentioned in the epistles, they obviously started with a strong foundation and continued to have a powerful witness for Christ.

TOPIC: BEREA

Paul and Silas wasted no time in getting to the synagogue to continue their ministry.

Acts 17:11

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

This is a wonderful testimony for the people in the synagogue who heard Paul and Silas preach. They gave a fair and impartial hearing. They were open minded, honest enquirers after the truth, and they were willing to listen to explanations of the Old Testament scriptures which pointed to the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

That they were "more noble" means that they were more generous, liberal, and open in their feelings, which made them more disposed to be willing to examine the doctrines.

Paul taught daily, not just on the Sabbath, and for the most part, the people did not resent his new interpretation, and they wanted to see it for themselves; Paul's preaching made Bible students of them.

TOPIC: IMPORTANCE OF DOCTRINE

Acts 17:12

Therefore many of them believed; also of honorable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.

The women were called "Greek women" and honorable, that is Gentile women of the upper class, those in honorable standing. So there were Jews who believed, many proselytes of the Jews, and other real Greeks.

Contrast this with the reception Paul and Barnabas got in Antioch of Pisidia, from the "honorable women".

Acts 13:50 But the Jews stirred up the devout and honorable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts.

Acts 17:13

But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also, and stirred up the people.

Paul, Silas, and the others probably ministered in Berea for several months. Then the Jews from Thessalonica traveled the 60 miles to Berea to raise a protest there, the same thing that the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium did when they followed Paul and Barnabas to Lystra (Acts 14:19).

they stirred up the people

The agitated the citizens of this noble town until the Christians there were able to provide safe conduct for Paul and his team to go elsewhere. Paul was called to come over the Macedonia (Acts 16:9), but now he was forced to leave the province on the threat of his life.

Acts 17:14,15

And then immediately the brethren sent away Paul to go to the sea: but Silas and Timothy abode there still.

And they that conducted Paul brought him to Athens: and receiving a commandment to Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.

Apparently it was Paul himself who was in danger, because the Christians speedily sent him on his way to the Aegean coast. In fact, they accompanied him all the way to Athens. Silas and Timothy, and presumably Luke, remained in Berea and continued to preach there.

He probably went by sea to Athens, but some interpreters say that Paul and his companions traveled on foot along the coastal road to Athens. That is, of course, possible, and the fact that Luke doesn't mention a port city or a sailing ship lends some evidence to this conjecture. The trip by land would be about 360 miles (considering distances on modern roads), or two weeks' of travel.

When Paul arrived at Athens, he asks his Berean friends to tell Silas and Timothy to come to Athens as soon as possible; and from Paul's writings we know that they came to Athens as soon as possible (1 Thess 1:1; 3:1). However, it would have taken Silas and Timothy at least several weeks to receive the message and themselves travel to Athens.

TOPIC: ATHENS

Acts 17:16

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.

It did not take long for Paul to see that the Greek city was completely filled with images to their gods; and he felt a continuing moral shock at this. However, he knew full well what the remedy was for this condition, and he prepared himself to preach both to the Jews in Athens

and to any Greeks who might give him a hearing.

Acts 17:17

Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

In Athens Paul ministered to a broad range of people, of various cultures and religious opinions. He preached to Jews and proselytes (devout persons), in synagogues and in their homes, and in the market places, he preached to pagan Greeks, many of them well-to-do and intellectual.

"In the market" means "in the agora" or "forum", not only the place where merchandise was sold, but also the place in Athens where philosophers held out in public discussion every day.

The marketplace of New Testament times known as the *agora* was a place for buying and selling goods (Mark 7:4); a place for children to play (Matt 11:16; Luke 7:32); a place for idlers and for men seeking work (Matt 20:3); a place where public events, including healings, occurred (Mark 6:56); the center of public life and debate (Acts 17:17); and a place where trials were held (Acts 16:19).¹

Acts 17:18

Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and Stoics, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblers say? others said, He seems to set forth strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.

Epicureans

Individually Epicurus and his followers devoted themselves primarily to the pursuit of personal, individual happiness. They taught that death

¹ Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible dictionary*.

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ought not to be feared, because even the soul comes to an end when the body dies.

The acquisition of friends was “the most important” means toward the securing of “happiness throughout the whole of life” (Diogenes), and happiness included justice and other virtues.

TOPIC: EPICUREANS

Stoics

The Stoics were one of the more important philosophical groups of the Hellenistic period, including the first century AD. They were followers of the thinker Zeno (332-226 BC), who taught that man attains his highest happiness when he subjects himself to the course of events, which divine necessity controls. The only direct reference in the Bible is in this verse.

TOPIC: STOICISM

The Greek philosophical types were mystified by what Paul was saying. If they like to encounter new ideas (see verse 21), they certainly would have enjoyed conversing with Paul!

They scorned Paul’s message, asking “What will this babblers say?” Paul preached virtually the same message as he did in the synagogues, Jesus and His resurrection.

Acts 17:19-21

And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine is that you speak of?

For you bring certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.

(For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)

The Areopagus was Mars Hill (17:22), synonymous names for the same place; Ares is

the Greek name for the Roman god Mars. This was a hill in the center of the city, the place where the Areopagites, the supreme judges of Athens, assembled. This is the place where Greek mythology said that Mars was tried for the murder of the son of another god, Neptune.

By many accounts this was the most celebrated tribunal in the world. Its decisions were distinguished for justice and correctness; nor was there any court in Greece in which so much confidence was placed. This court took cognizance of murders, impieties, and immoralities; they punished vices of all kinds, including idleness; they rewarded the virtuous; they were especially attentive to blasphemies against the gods, and to the performance of the sacred mysteries of religion. It was, therefore, with the greatest propriety that Paul was brought before this tribunal, as being regarded as a setter forth of strange gods, and as being supposed to wish to introduce a new mode of worship.

The questions the Greeks put to Paul seem to be very respectful, and there’s nothing to show that Paul was on trial in any way. This was the place where religion was usually discussed, by citizens, judges, wise men of Athens, and foreigners (“strangers were there”). Paul was there to satisfy people’s curiosity (17:21).

The men gathers in Paul’s audience were men of leisure who enjoyed speculation, discussion, new systems of philosophy. Whether they would accept the gospel of Christ was another matter, at least they would give this strange message a hearing.

Athens

Various resources were used to compile this article, including the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

Athens was the most important city of Attica in ancient times, the capital of the same district in New Testament times, and the capital of the Republic of Greece in the modern era. The name has been derived, so it would seem, from that of the patron goddess Athena (Minerva).

The city of Athens is important to biblical studies as the scene of Paul's famous Areopagus address (Acts 17:15–34). Having been driven from Berea by the antagonism of the Jews, Paul waited in Athens for the arrival of his companions, who had remained in Berea for a short time. It is not known whether Athens was included in Paul's program of evangelization or whether the opportunity and stimulus for his preaching in that city were provided by the circumstances he encountered.

The account in Acts does not make clear whether Paul approached Athens by land or by sea. If he came by sea he would have landed at Piraeus, which was the seaport of Athens and the base for her navy. Located 5 mi (8 km) from Athens, Piraeus was joined to the city by a corridor about 250 ft (75 m) wide protected by walls about 50 ft (15 m) high. Most likely Paul would have traveled outside these walls in a northeasterly direction, on the road leading to Athens. On this road Pausanias claims to have observed "altars to gods called unknown."

The existence of inscriptions worded in the singular in accordance with the statement of Paul (Acts 17:23) has been questioned. McDonald, however, asserts knowledge of two late literary passages that refer to an unknown god (BA, 4 [1941], 1). Coming by this way, Paul would have entered the city from the west through the "dipylon" (double gate), from which a road continuing to the southeast led directly to the agora.

The agora in an ancient city was the focal point of political, commercial, and social life. Here, as well as in the synagogue, Paul engaged in discussion with the people, conspicuous among whom were the Stoics and Epicureans. The agora was a large open space enclosed by civic and religious buildings. Modern excavators have discovered the foundations of buildings that correspond substantially with the description of the agora given by the historian Pausanias. Among these were the Odeion, or music hall, the stoa of Attalos on the east, and two long parallel stoas on the south.

A stoa was a long narrow pavilion with a colonnade on one side and a wall on the other. The stoas were the scene of public lectures and discussions. The circular Tholos on the west was the meeting place of the executive sections of the Athenian Council of five hundred. Also on the west were: the Bouleuterion, where the Council met; the Metroön, the sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods; the temple of Apollo Patroös; and the stoa of Zeus Eleutherios. The temple of Ares was toward the center of the open area of the agora.

The AREOPAGUS was directly S of the agora, and the Acropolis was to the southeast. The Acropolis, a commanding hill 512 ft (156 m) high was customarily approached from the west, through an ornamental gateway known as the Propylaea. Here on the south stood the small temple of Wingless Victory. The top of the hill was dominated by the Parthenon, which contained a gold and ivory statue of Athena made by Phidias, Pericles' sculptor. The Erechtheion stood on the north. This was a temple erected in honor of Erechtheus, the semi divine hero who is reputed to have been the first king of Athens, though we cannot be sure that he was more than a legendary character. The Prytaneion, or town hall, where the sacred fire of the city was always kept aflame, was on the north slope of the Acropolis, E of the Agora. North of the Prytaneion the Roman Forum was built through the generosity of the Caesars, Julius and Augustus. When Paul visited Athens, the temple of Olympian Zeus stood unfinished, SE of the Acropolis. When it was completed, this structure, known as the Olympeion, was the largest temple in all Greece. The Odeion, or music hall of Pericles, and the theater of Dionysos stood S and SW of the Acropolis, respectively. The temple of Hephaestus was located W of the agora on a small hill known as the Kolonos Agoraios. In the past this temple has been identified wrongly, at times, as the temple of Theseus. That it is indeed the Hephaesteion, the temple of the god of fire and metallurgy, has been confirmed by the discovery of numerous metalworking shops on

the slopes of the hill on which it stands. The Acropolis, which is ideally situated for defense and water supply, bears evidence of having been inhabited from earliest times.

See further in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia and in the Wikipedia article on Athens.

Athens, one of the greatest cultural centers of Paul's day, grew up around a 520-foot-high rocky plateau called the Acropolis. Here, on this elevated area, stood the many-columned Parthenon, the far-famed architectural wonder, and so many other sacred edifices that the place was called "the many-templed Acropolis."

To the north of the Acropolis was the celebrated civic center and market place, known as the Agora, where people not only traded, but also visited and discussed questions of interest at the time. To the northwest there extended out from the Acropolis, on a somewhat lower level, a rocky hill called the Areopagus, or Mars' Hill, where the councils and the High Court met.

This limestone hill is situated between the Acropolis and the Agora. In Roman mythology Mars was the god of war; his counterpart in Greek mythology was Ares. Many translations of the Bible will use the word "Areopagus" instead of the phrase "Mars' Hill" when describing this location. The word "Areopagus" means "the hill of Ares."

Both of these well-known places were familiar to Paul. In the Agora he 'disputed daily with them that met with him," among whom were the Stoics and Epicureans, who, with mingled admiration and curiosity, regarded him as "a setter forth of strange gods"; therefore brought him up the hill to speak before and to be heard by an informal session of the supreme court. Standing in the midst of Mars' Hill, before these representatives of the best learning of the earth, Paul took as his text "the Unknown God," and delivered, with telling effect, one of the most dynamic messages of all time. Some mocked, some were deeply impressed, while others were converted then and there.

According to Luke, the apostle Paul only paid one visit to this city. However, by the time Paul got to Athens most of its glory had already passed—most of Greece had been plundered by the Romans, and even Athens had been sacked by Sulla in 86 BC. While Paul waited for Silas and Timothy to join him at Athens, he traveled through the ancient city and was appalled by the high degree of paganism in the city. An ancient Proverb claimed that there were more gods in Athens than men, and wherever Paul looked he could see "that the city was given over to idols" (Acts 17:16). Paul then "reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17).

Finally, he had the opportunity to address the philosophers on Mars' Hill and there proclaimed to them "God, who made the world and everything in it" (Acts 17:24).

Thanks to the American School of Classical Studies, the Agora has been uncovered, its streets have been charted, and its ruined buildings identified. The visitor may now walk among these ruins and contemplate the past.

The thirty-five stone steps carved in the rock up Mars' Hill, and traces of an altar and many rock benches on top of the hill, are visible today. Thousands of tourists from all parts of the world climb these self-same steps and, standing on Mars' Hill, are even now visibly moved by the words as well as the spirit and power of Paul's mighty address.

Away to the southwest is the ancient roadway leading to Corinth.

No remains of an altar inscription – "To the Unknown God," referred to by Paul, have as yet been found in Athens, but an identical inscription on an altar was found in 1903 during the excavations of the city of Pergamum.

Epicureans

Epicureans were members of a philosophical movement initiated by Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) on Lesbos off the western coast of Asia Minor

(311 B.C.) and taken to Athens (306 B.C.). The movement, which maintained the unaltered teachings of its founder, spread to Rome after 146 B.C. and during the 1st cent B.C. became identified with hedonism. Its decline coincided with the decline of Rome, and it was no match for Christianity once the latter became an acceptable Roman religion (after A.D. 323).

TEACHINGS

Individuality: Epicurus and his followers devoted themselves primarily to the pursuit of personal, individual happiness. In contrast to classical Greek thought, Hellenistic thought gave ethics great importance. After the death of Alexander the Great (323 B.C.) many Greeks were unable to accept his notion of a “cosmopolitan culture” in which Greeks and non-Greeks would live together. When many Greeks were forced to abandon their secure existence within the city-state, they withdrew from active participation in a supranational culture and began to search inwardly for happiness. Though Epicurus advocated little involvement in social and political life and stressed individual happiness, he did not promote individualism. For the acquisition of friends was “the most important” means toward the securing of “happiness throughout the whole of life” (Diogenes x.148, LCL), and happiness included justice and other virtues (cf. DeWitt, Epicurus, ch 14).

Pleasure: It is well known (even today) that Epicurus believed that human happiness consisted in pleasure (Gk *hēdoné*). But to him pleasure was a substitute for the experience of pain, not an invitation to indulge in the “pleasures of the flesh.” According to his own testimony, Epicurus did not teach “the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, ... [but] the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul” (Diogenes x.131f).

Although Epicurus warned against indulgence in physical things because pain will be increased, he did not deny moderate use of physical enjoyment. He even constructed a

hierarchy of physical pleasures. Some are natural and necessary, such as food; some are natural but not necessary, such as sexual union. Some are neither natural nor necessary, such as fame; some are short-lived, and these are inferior to those that are long-lived (Diogenes x.149).

The bodily pleasures were not deemed evil in themselves, but the mental pleasures were preferred. The happy person was one who attained mental peace (Gk *ataraxía*, “lack of disturbance”). Besides having peace of mind, the happy person would be just, wise, and temperate. If one “is not able to live wisely, though he lives well and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life” (Diogenes x.140). Clearly, then, the good life for Epicurus included the virtues of mental peace, justice, wisdom, and temperance, through which the individual achieved a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain.

Present Happiness: Epicurus aimed at a lifestyle in which the present was given more prominence than the future. For many of his contemporaries the future held the fears of death and divine punishment, but Epicurus taught that (1) there is no life after (physical) death, for death is the dissolution of the atoms of our bodily existence; (2) even if man were to live on, there would be no divine retribution, for the gods are not concerned with human life. This deliverance from fears of the future contributed to present human happiness.

Materialism: Epicurus’s ethical teachings must be related to his thoughts on physics. He conceived of reality materialistically, with atoms as the basic components of the universe. Assuming that all of reality is material, Epicurus concluded that human souls and the deities likewise are material. Moreover, as life is the integration of atoms, so death is their disintegration. When death occurs, the person no longer perceives and ceases to be. Future life is nonexistent.

As Epicurus sought to avoid individualism in his social philosophy, so he tried to escape a

thoroughgoing determinism in his natural philosophy. On the one hand, all atoms “act” according to natural laws, i.e., according to cause and effect. On the other hand, human actions are done in freedom: “necessity destroys responsibility ...; whereas our actions are free, and it is to them that praise and blame naturally attach” (Diogenes x.133f). (For a sympathetic treatment of Epicurus’s attempt to reconcile human ethical freedom and physical determinism, see DeWitt, Epicurus, pp. 169, 171.)

Role of the Gods: Epicurus’s materialism did not result in atheism (Diogenes x.123). For him deities were material beings who certainly did exist. For practical reasons, however, they did not play a crucial role in human life. The gods were eternal and felicitous and did not interfere with human actions because doing so would have detracted from their own blessedness. Thus they did not punish people for unethical deeds either in this life or in an afterlife (should there be one).

EPICURUS AND SCRIPTURE

Ecclesiastes: The earlier scholarly attempts to show Epicurean influences on Qoheleth in the long run “could not prove convincing, and it transpired that the decisive parallels were to be sought less in Greece than in the Old Testament itself, in Egypt and in Babylonia”.

Paul: In Luke’s summary of Paul’s address on the Areopagus in Athens, Paul did not criticize the Epicureans for their stress on pleasure but for their denial of the Resurrection (Acts 17:31). Nowhere in his letters does Paul mention the Epicureans, not even in Col. 2:8 (though Colossae was “the sort of town where Epicureanism flourished” [DeWitt, St. Paul, p. 75]). But he was very much aware of their presence in many of the cities of his missionary journeys.

Paul used phrases similar to Epicurus’s (e.g., “peace and safety,” 1 Thess. 5:3) and possibly employed similar words (e.g., the uncommon NT words “eternal” [Rom. 1:20, Gk *aídios*] and “atom” [1 Cor. 15:52, Gk *atómos*; cf. DeWitt, St.

Paul, pp. 13, 117]). Paul also voiced Epicurus’s warning not to revel in physical pleasures (Gal. 5:13; 1 Cor. 5:1, 11).

But Paul’s teachings differed from the teachings of Epicurus. Paul used the word “pleasure” sparingly (Tit. 3:3), for “no compromise with pleasure was conceivable” to him (DeWitt, St. Paul, p. 172). Personal pleasure became a rejoicing in the Lord (Phil. 4:4); “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden in God (1 Cor. 2:7) and not in nature; freedom is not merely a deliverance from fear, pain, and death but a positive putting into practice of divine love (Gal. 5:1, 13); the atoms are not eternal but God’s power is (Rom. 1:20); mental peace is replaced by divine peace (1 Thess. 5:3).

The central thrust of Paul’s theology contrasts with Epicureanism. (1) The universe is basically spiritual and not material (though the material realm is not negated), and man’s spirit is a reflection of the divine Spirit. (2) God is blessed (Gk *makários*, 1 Tim. 1:11) and eternal but does become actively involved in human affairs — notably in the Incarnation. (3) God’s final judgment will be just — a warning to unbelievers and a comfort to believers. (4) Christ’s death overcomes the “sting” of death, and a future life is affirmed. (5) True peace is found in the present life within the Christian community.²

from Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*

If Stoicism, in its full development, was utterly opposed to Christianity, the same may be said of the very primary principles of the Epicurean³ school. If the Stoics were Pantheists, the

² Bromiley, G. W. (1988; 2002). *Vol. 2: The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (120–122). Wm. B. Eerdmans.

³ Epicurus, who founded this school (for its doctrines were never further developed), was born in Samos, BC 342, though his parents were natives of Attica. He dies in BC 270.

Epicureans were virtually Atheists. Their philosophy was a system of materialism, in the strictest sense of the word. In their view, the world was formed by an accidental concourse of atoms, and was not in any sense created, or even modified, by the Divinity. They did indeed profess a certain belief in what were called gods; but these equivocal divinities were merely phantoms, impressions on the popular mind, dreams, which had no objective reality, or at least exercised no active influence on the physical world, or the business of life.

The Epicurean deity, if self-existent at all, dwelt apart, in serene indifference to all the affairs of the universe. The universe was a great accident, and sufficiently explained itself without any reference to a higher power. The popular mythology was derided, but the Epicureans had no positive faith in anything better. As there was no creator, so there was no moral governor. All notions of retribution and of judgment to come were of course forbidden by such a creed. The principles of the atomic theory, when applied to the constitution of man, must have caused the resurrection to appear an absurdity. The soul was nothing without the body; or rather, the soul was itself a body, composed of finer atoms, or at best an unmeaning compromise between the material and the immaterial. Both body and soul were dissolved together and dissipated into the elements; and when this occurred, all the life of man was ended.

The moral result of such a creed was necessarily that which the Apostle Paul described (1 Cor. 15:32): "If the dead rise not, let us eat and drink: for tomorrow we die." The essential principle of the Epicurean philosopher was that there was nothing to alarm him, nothing to disturb him. His furthest reach was to do deliberately what the animals do instinctively. His highest aim was to gratify himself. With the coarser and more energetic minds, this principle inevitably led to the grossest sensuality and crime; in the case of others, whose temperament was more common place, or whose taste was more pure, the

system took the form of a selfishness more refined.

As the Stoic sought to resist the evil which surrounded him, the Epicurean endeavored to console himself by a tranquil and indifferent life. He avoided the more violent excitements of political and social engagements, to enjoy the seclusion of a calm contentment. But pleasure was still the end at which he aimed; and if we remove this end to its remotest distance, and understand it to mean an enjoyment which involves the most manifold self-denial, if we give Epicurus credit for taking the largest view of consequences, and if we believe that the life of his first disciples was purer than there is reason to suppose, the end remains the same. Pleasure, not duty, is the motive of moral exertion; expediency is the test to which actions are referred; and the self-denial itself, which an enlarged view of expediency requires, will probably be found impracticable without the grace of God. Thus, the Gospel met in the Garden an opposition not less determined, and more insidious, than the antagonism of the Porch. The two enemies it has ever had to contend with are the two ruling principles of the Epicureans and Stoics: Pleasure and Pride.

Such, in their original and essential character, were the two schools of philosophy with which St. Paul was brought directly into contact. We ought, however, to consider how far these schools had been modified by the lapse of time, by the changes which succeeded Alexander and accompanied the formation of the Roman Empire, and by the natural tendencies of the Roman character. When Stoicism and Epicureanism were brought to Rome, they were such as we have described them. In as far as they were speculative systems, they found little favor: Greek philosophy was always regarded with some degree of distrust among the Romans. Their mind was alien from science and pure speculation. Philosophy, like art and literature, was of foreign introduction.

The cultivation of such pursuits was followed by private persons of wealth and taste, but was little extended among the community at large.

There was no public schools of philosophy at Rome. Where it was studied at all, it was studied, not for its own sake, but for the service of the state. Thus, the peculiarly practical character of the Stoic and Epicurean systems recommended them to the notice of many. What was wanted in the prevailing misery of the Roman world was a philosophy of life. There were some who weakly yielded, and some who offered a courageous resistance, to the evil of the times. The former, under the name of Epicureans, either spent their time in a serene tranquility, away from the distractions and disorders of political life, or indulged in the grossest sensualism, and justified it on principle.

The Roman adherents of the school of Epicurus were never numerous, and few great names can be mentioned among them, though one monument remains, and will ever remain, of this phase of philosophy, in the poem of Lucretius. The Stoical school was more congenial to the endurance of the Roman character: and it educated the minds of some of the noblest men of the time, who scorned to be carried away by the stream of vice. Three great names can be mentioned, which divided the period between the preaching of St. Paul and the final establishment of Christianity, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.

But such men were few in a time of general depravity and unbelief. And this was really the character of the time. It was a period in the history of the world, when conquest and discovery, facilities of traveling, and the mixture of races, had produced a general fusion of opinions, resulting in an indifference to moral distinctions, and at the same time encouraging the most abject credulity. The Romans had been carrying on the work which Alexander and his successors begun. A certain degree of culture was very generally diffused. The opening of new countries excited curiosity. New religions were eagerly welcomed. Immoral rites found willing votaries. Vice and superstition went hand in hand through all parts of society, and, as the natural consequence, a scornful

skepticism held possession of all the higher intellects.

But though the period of which we are speaking was one of general skepticism, for the space of three centuries the old dogmatic schools still lingered on, more especially in Greece. Athens was indeed no longer what she had once been, the centre from which scientific and poetic light radiated to the neighboring shores of Asia and Europe. Philosophy had found new homes in other cities, more especially in Tarsus and Alexandria. But Alexandria, though she was commercially great and possessed the trade of three continents, had not yet seen the rise of her greatest schools; and Tarsus could never be what Athens was, even in her decay, to those who traveled with cultivated tastes, and for the purposes of education. Thus Philosophy still maintained her seat in the city of Socrates.

The four great schools, the Lyceum and the Academy, the Garden and the Porch, were never destitute of exponents of their doctrines. When Cicero came, not long after Sulla's siege, he found the philosophers in residence. As the Empire grew, Athens assumed more and more the character of a university town. After Christianity was first preached there, this character was confirmed to the place by the embellishments and the benefactions of Hadrian. And before the schools were closed by the orders of Justinian, the city which had received Cicero and Atticus as students together, became the scene of the friendship of St. Basil and St. Gregory', one of the most beautiful episodes of primitive Christianity.

Stoicism

from Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*

Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school, was a native of the same part of the Levant with St. Paul himself. He came from Cyprus to Athens at a time when patriotism was decayed and political liberty lost, and when a system, which promised the power of brave and self-sustaining endurance amid the general

degradation, found a willing acceptance among the nobler minds. Thus in the Painted Porch, which, as we have said, had once been the meeting place of the poets, those who, instead of yielding to the prevailing evil of the times, thought they were able to resist it, formed themselves into a school of philosophers. In the high tone of this school, and in some of its ethical language, Stoicism was an apparent approximation to Christianity; but on the whole, it was a hostile system, in its physics, its morals, and its theology.

The Stoics condemned the worship of images and the use of temples, regarding them as nothing better than the ornaments of art. But they justified the popular polytheism, and, in fact, considered the gods of mythology as minor developments of the Great World God, which summed up their belief concerning the origin and existence of the world.

The Stoics were Pantheists; and much of their language is a curious anticipation of the phraseology of modern Pantheism. In their view, God was merely the Spirit or Reason of the Universe. The world was itself a rational soul, producing all things out of itself, and resuming it all to itself again. Matter was inseparable from the Deity. He did not create: He only organized. He merely impressed law and order on the substance, which was, in fact, Himself. The manifestation of the Universe was only a period in the development of God.

In conformity with these notions of the world, which substitute a sublime destiny for the belief in a personal Creator and Preserver, were the notions which were held concerning the soul and its relation to the body. The soul was, in fact, corporeal. The Stoics said that at death it would be burnt, or return to be absorbed in God. Thus, a resurrection from the dead, in the sense in which the Gospel has revealed it, must have appeared to the Stoics irrational. Nor was their moral system less hostile to "the truth as it is in Jesus." The proud ideal which was set before the disciple of Zeno was, a magnanimous self denial, an austere apathy, untouched by human passion, unmoved by change of

circumstance. To the Wise man all outward things were alike. Pleasure was no good. Pain was no evil. All actions conformable to Reason were equally good; all actions contrary to Reason were equally evil.

The Wise man lives according to Reason: and living thus, he is perfect and self sufficing. He reigns supreme as a king, he is justified in boasting as a god. Nothing can well be imagined more contrary to the spirit of Christianity. Nothing could be more repugnant to the Stoic than the news of a " Savior," who has atoned for our sin, and is ready to aid our weakness. Christianity is the School of Humility; Stoicism was the Education of Pride. Christianity is a discipline of life: stoicism was nothing better than an apprenticeship for death. And fearfully were the fruits of its principle illustrated both in its earlier and later disciples. Its first two leaders died by their own hands; like the two Romans whose names first rise to the memory, when the school of the Stoics is mentioned.

But Christianity turns the desperate resolution, that seeks to escape disgrace by death, into the anxious question, "What must I do to be saved?" "It softens the pride of stern indifference into the consolation of mutual sympathy. How great is the contrast between the Stoic ideal and the character of Jesus Christ! How different is the acquiescence in an iron destiny from the trust in a merciful and watchful Providence! How infinitely inferior is that sublime egotism, which looks down with contempt on human weakness, to the religion which tells us that "they who mourn are blessed," and which commands us to "rejoice with them that rejoice. and to weep with them that weep!"

from The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Stoics in the NT

The only direct reference to the Stoics in the Bible occurs in Acts 17:18, where Paul is reported to have addressed Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens. During this speech the apostle, perhaps following his own principle of being "all things to all men" (1 Cor. 9:22),

introduced a quotation from “some of your poets,” including the Stoic Aratus, who in the introductory dedication to Zeus of his poem *Phaenomena* said: “For we are indeed his offspring” (cf. Acts 17:28). At the end of the address some of the philosophers mocked Paul, but others wanted to hear more (v 32).

There is no real support for the theory that the division ran along party lines, the Epicureans being the mockers and the Stoics the ones who showed more interest. But Stoicism undoubtedly has a greater affinity to biblical teaching than Epicureanism. Parallels may be found between Stoic thought and the wisdom literature, and especially the Apocrypha. He. 4:12 recalls the hymn of the Stoic Cleanthes, and NT lists of virtues are similar to Stoic lists. Paul’s contentment in Phil. 4:11f may be compared to Stoic “*ataraxía*”, and the concept of the Logos offers a point of contact in a formal sense. Even stylistically Paul perhaps shows the influence of the Stoic diatribe.

Stoic Thinkers

Stoicism was founded in Athens by Zeno (332–260 B.C.) and acquired its name from the painted porch (Stoa) in the Agora where its proponents taught. Zeno himself came from Cyprus and was possibly of Semitic origin. The development and influence of his school were due to a succession of able thinkers, especially Chrysippus (d ca 205 B.C.), who gave the philosophy a more systematic form. Panaetius brought Stoicism to the Roman world, where it mingled to some extent with Platonism, e.g., in Posidonius’s works, and took a more practical bent. It influenced Cicero and found able expositors in Paul’s contemporary Seneca (A.D. 4–65), Epictetus (55–138), and the philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180). Knowledge of the earlier Stoics is limited to the accounts of Diogenes and fragments. In contrast, the works of the Roman Stoics provide rich documentation and show why Stoicism could enjoy such popularity in the educated circles of antiquity.

Stoic Teaching

Fundamental to the Stoic view of reality was the postulate of an all-determinative cosmic force which could be popularly identified as Zeus. This force embraced all things; the things themselves were composed of material atoms, souls being made of finer atoms than bodies. Stoicism could hardly be classified as materialistic, however, for it saw dynamic reason (*lógos*) as everywhere present, and within it were the seminal *lógoi*, through which individual things came into being. Human souls were thus regarded as emanations from the cosmic *lógos*. The destiny which controlled all things, therefore, was neither blind nor hostile, but wise and good, as might be seen in the harmonious operation of the universe. Virtue consisted of finding the thrust of destiny (or nature) and adjusting life to it. Individual passions and emotional reactions represented a disruptive force which could only cause conflict and a losing battle with nature; they were thus to be suppressed.

Mastery of emotions and indifference to changing circumstances constituted the summit of virtue. Those who achieved this entered into a relation to the cosmos that identified them with universal reason, lifted them above human conflicts and distinctions, and thus fashioned them into a cosmopolitan society.

Stoic Influence

For all the obvious parallels to Christian doctrine, Stoicism differs from the gospel at essential points. It has no concept of a personal God, no radical view of sin, no place for historical divine acts culminating in the incarnation, no idea of ethical renewal through the ministry of the Word and Spirit, and no hope of the resurrection and eternal fellowship with God in His kingdom. Nevertheless, Stoicism had a considerable impact on early Christian theology. 1 Clement echoes Stoicism in its presentation of the divine order (20; 33). Justin Martyr reflected Stoicism and Platonism in his description of God’s role in creation (*Apology*. i.20, 44, 59). Theophilus of Antioch made use of such technical Stoic words as

“immanent” (*Ad Autolyicum* i.2). The parallel between the Johannine and the Stoic *lógos* appealed to Justin Martyr, possibly for apologetic reasons in the first instance, but with implications for his general understanding of Christian truth (*Apol.* i.32, 46). Tatian, too, equated the preexistent *lógos* with the rationality of the Father (*Oratio ad Graecos* v; cf. Justin Martyr *Dial* 61.2). Origen would later find in the seminal *lógos* the principle which enables human beings to maintain identity in the resurrection from the dead (*De prin.* ii.10.3). Even Athanasius in the 4th cent could use the Stoic idea of the *lógos* as the soul of the universe, although for him the *lógos* was, of course, personal. His animation of His human nature makes sense as a special instance of His animation of the cosmos in its totality.

Justin Martyr found another useful parallel in the Stoic idea of the world’s destruction by fire (*Apol.* i.45). Tertullian, for all his distinction between Athens and Jerusalem, not only could invoke the ideas of *lógos* and spirit in Zeno and Cleanthes (*Apol.* i.21) but also could accept the concept of the materiality of the soul (*De anima* ix) and even use materialistic language when speaking of the divine Trinity.

Stoicism also exerted a considerable influence in the ethical sphere, as may be seen in Clement of Alexandria’s equation of sinlessness with freedom from passion (*Paedagogus* i.2) and also in many of the detailed discussions of Latin fathers, especially Ambrose and Augustine. But the overall impact of Stoic philosophy should not be exaggerated. Christian theology drew its main substance from the gospel, developed to a large extent independently of Stoic teaching, and even directly opposed it at such important points as its pantheism and fatalism. For the most part, Christian thinkers simply appropriated what seemed to be useful Stoic terms and concepts — not without some risk — in their attempt to offer either an apologetical presentation or a contemporary intellectual formulation of the biblical message.
