

Altar of Unknown God

Acts 17:16-34

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him.

Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ For in him we live and move and have our being.”^[b] As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.”^[c]

²⁹ “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” ³³ At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴ Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.



Notes.

Areopagus or [Mars Hill](#)

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Context and Observations

Apologetics

Apologetics is the study and practice of giving answers for the reasonableness and truth of the Christian faith. The word comes from the Greek *apologia* and means “to give a defense.” In [1 Peter 3:15](#), Christians are commanded to give an *apologia* to anyone who asks the reason for our hope.

Apologetics in action; Paul started his message by addressing the false beliefs of those gathered there that day and then used those beliefs as a way of presenting the gospel message to them.

Mars Hill

Rising some 377 feet above the land below and not far from the Acropolis and the Marketplace, Mars Hill served as the meeting place for the Areopagus Court, the highest court in Greece for civil, criminal, and religious matters. Even under Roman rule in the time of the New Testament, Mars Hill remained an important meeting place where philosophy, religion, and law were discussed.

The Altar of the Unknown God

The following is based upon an account recorded by Diogenes Laertius in the third century A.D. regarding how the altar of the unknown god came about.

In the 6th Century B.C., Athens was the subject of a terrible plague and the city elders were at a loss to know how to cure it. They believed the city was under a curse because they were guilty of treachery against the followers of Cylon who were slain after they had been promised an amnesty. To remove the curse, they tried sacrificial offerings, to no avail.

Turning to the Oracle for wisdom, the priestess at Delphi told them, there was another god who remained unappeased for their treachery. The priestess did not know but advised them that they should send a ship to the island of Crete and fetch a man called Epimenides who would know how to appease the offended god.

At seeing the hundreds of statues lining the streets when he arrived, Epimenides postulated that indeed there must still be a god unknown to them great enough and good enough to do something about the plague if they invoked his help. But, the elders questioned, how could they call upon a god whose name is unknown? Epimenides responded; any god good and great enough to do something about the plague is probably also good and great enough to smile on their ignorance if they acknowledged their ignorance and called upon him.

Epimenides advised the elders to seek a sign from the unknown god. He told them to graze a flock of healthy sheep of different colors, some white, some black on the grassy slope of Mars Hill. He then prayed something on the lines of... “O thou unknown god! Behold the plague afflicting the city. And if indeed you feel compassion to forgive and help us, behold the flock of sheep. Reveal your willingness to respond I plead, by causing any sheep that pleases you to lie upon the grass instead of grazing. Choose white if white pleases; black if black pleases. And those you choose we will sacrifice to you, thereby acknowledging our pitiful ignorance of your name”. Epimenides ordered stonemasons to construct altars on each animal’s resting place. On each, following Epimenides’ instructions, they inscribed the words “agnostos theos” meaning “to an unknown god”. Within a week, the Athenians stricken by the plague recovered. Years later, an Athenian recalled the altars of the unknown gods from Epimenides prophecy and set in search of them to save them as a tribute to these unknown gods. However, he only found one worth keeping, and he had it restored.

Epimenides was a classical philosopher and poet from Crete. He wrote once that “all Cretans are liars”, a line that Paul quotes in Titus 1:12 “*One of Crete’s own prophets has said it: “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.”*” Titus lived amid liars, in a place where falsehood was woven into the fabric of society. He was to fight against those lies and instruct the believers in Crete according to God’s truth.