

MONIQUE CUANY

# Proclaiming the Kerygma in Athens

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*  
596

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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament · 2. Reihe

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Monique Cuany

# Proclaiming the Kerygma in Athens

The Argument of Acts 17:16-34  
in Light of the Epicurean and Stoic Debates  
about Piety and Divine Images  
in Early Post-Hellenistic Times

Mohr Siebeck

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To my parents  
Jacqueline and Dominique Cuany



## Preface

This study is a slightly revised version of my PhD thesis, submitted at the University of Cambridge in 2018.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof Simon Gathercole, for reading my work with so much care, and providing me with helpful feedback and encouragement during those years, including on many pieces which never made it into this thesis. His expertise, attention to detail and precision in thinking has often challenged and inspired me, and made my thesis a much better work. Likewise, Prof Judith Lieu provided helpful criticism and advice at various stages of this project, especially during the first and second year of my research, challenging me to reflect on my methodology and the broader implications of my proposal. I also wish to thank the examiners of my thesis, Prof Sean Adams and Dr James Carleton Paget, for their helpful criticisms, remarks and suggestions.

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## Abbreviations

Abbreviations of biblical and other ancient writings generally follow the conventions in P. H. Alexander et al., eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), and can be found in the index of references at the end of the present volume.

The additional abbreviations used are provided here for the reader's convenience.

EOD	"English Oxford Living Dictionaries." Oxford University Press, <a href="https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/english">https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/english</a> .
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George/Scott, Robert/Stuart Jones, Henry. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9 <sup>th</sup> ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon. 1996.
MC	Personal translation [Monique Cuany]
OCD	Hornblower, Simon/Spawforth, Antony, eds. <i>Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> . 3 <sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2005.
PHI	"Searchable Greek Inscriptions: A Scholarly Tool in Progress." The Packard Humanities Institute, <a href="https://epigraphy.packhum.org/">https://epigraphy.packhum.org/</a> .
TLG	"Thesaurus Linguae Graecae: A Digital Library of Greek Literature." University of California, <a href="http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/">http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/</a> .
TDNT	Kittel, Gerhard and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . 10 vols. Translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1964.
TLNT	Spicq, Ceslas. <i>Theological Lexicon of the New Testament</i> . 3 vols. Translated and edited by James D. Ernest. Peabody: Hendrickson. 1994.
SVF	Arnim, Hans Friedrich August von. <i>Stoicorum veterum fragmenta</i> . 4 vols. Leipzig: Teubner. 1903–24.
Usener	Usener, Hermann, ed. <i>Epicurea</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2010 [1887].

*Greek and Latin authors*

Arius Didymus

*Epit.*            *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*

Cicero

*ND*            *De natura deorum (On the Nature of the Gods)*

Epicurus

*Ep. Hdt.*       *Epistle to Herodotus**Ep. Men.*       *Epistle to Menoeceus**Ep. Pyth.*       *Epistle to Pythocles**KΔ*            *Kuriai Doxai (Principal Doctrines)*

Lucretius

*RN*            *De rerum natura*

Philodemus

*P. Herc. 1251* [*On Choices and Avoidances*]

Seneca

*[Superst.]*     *[De superstitione]*

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The Areopagus Speech in Acts and Scholarship

The passage in Acts (17:16–34) depicting the apostle Paul debating with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and delivering a speech to the Areopagus in Athens constitutes the oldest account of a confrontation between Christianity and Graeco-Roman religion and philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Situated in the ancient cultural capital of Greece and penned with literary skills which have often drawn superlatives from exegetes,<sup>2</sup> this well-known scene has become a symbol of the encounter between Christianity and Graeco-Roman culture and its wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

In the book of Acts, this pericope is indeed one of the two *sole* descriptions of a Christian speech delivered to a broader Gentile audience.<sup>4</sup> This quasi-unique status in a narrative which describes the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem (Acts 1) to Rome (Acts 28) led many past and current exegetes to the conclusion that the speech in Athens is ‘the’ or at least ‘a’ climax in the whole book. For example, in his landmark article published in 1939, Martin Dibelius wrote:

The scene in the book of Acts in which Paul preaches to the people of Athens (17.19-34) denotes, and is intended to denote, a climax in the book. The whole account of the scene testifies to that: the speech on the Areopagus is the only sermon reported by the author which is preached to the Gentiles by the apostle to the Gentiles.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Following the current convention in scholarship, the author of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts will be referred to as ‘Luke’ in the present work. For the sake of convenience, the passage of Acts 17: 16–34 will sometimes be referred to simply as ‘Acts 17.’

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Harnack 1906: 321: ‘das wundervollste Stück der Apostelgeschichte.’ Cf. Mason 2012: 165–166: ‘an author of considerable worldly knowledge and literary ability.’

<sup>3</sup> Conzelmann 1966: 217. Cf. Johnson 1992: 318: Luke made this account ‘the exemplary meeting between Jerusalem and Athens, and the anticipation of the Christianized Hellenistic culture for which it provided the symbol.’

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the brief words addressed to the crowds in Lystra (Acts 14:15–17). As Soards (1994: 11) points out, the categorization of the speeches between mission- and trial- speeches in Acts is largely artificial, since the judicial speeches often contain the same elements as the *Missionsreden*. Hence the reference here to speeches to a ‘broader’ Gentile audience to distinguish them from speeches addressed to Gentile officials in trial narratives.

<sup>5</sup> Dibelius 1956a: 260. The German scholar also emphasized the style and compactness of the speech which suggest its importance.

Along the same lines, but proceeding more from an analysis of the structure of Luke's complete narrative and his theological purposes, Paul Schubert argued that the speech in Athens is 'the final climactic part of his exposition' because it 'is not only a hellenized but also a universalized version of Luke's *βουλή*-theology.'<sup>6</sup> Less categorical about the climactic status of the speech in the book of Acts, Jacques Dupont nonetheless concluded that Luke had sought to make this pericope the climax of Paul's *missionary* career. For the Belgian scholar, the fact that Luke chose to situate Paul's discourse to the Gentiles in Athens, a city in which his ministry was clearly not as important as in Corinth and Ephesus, and which was not at all an important political place, shows that he wants to sketch a symbolic scene of significance: 'la rencontre du message évangélique avec la sagesse des Grecs.'<sup>7</sup>

Of course, past scholars have also been impressed by the compactness, the rhetorical flourish, and the sophisticated interaction with Greek philosophy displayed in the pericope of Acts 17. Clearly Luke seemed to have crafted this passage with particular care and thus given it a special importance. But above all, it is Acts' apparent concern with the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles and Paul as a 'light to the nations' (Acts 13:47) which played a crucial role in their assessment of the centrality of this pericope in the account of the first Christian historian.<sup>8</sup>

Today, few exegetes would argue that Acts 17 is *the* climax of Luke's narrative.<sup>9</sup> There is indeed little in the overall structure of Acts to suggest that this pericope is climactic or even central in Acts.<sup>10</sup> But it has remained a crucial text to assess how Luke situates or describes Christianity's position towards the Gentile world, a problematic which lies at the heart of the Lukan project and has been central in scholarship on Luke-Acts for at least two centuries. As Daniel Marguerat summarizes:

How does he situate Christianity between Jerusalem and Rome – or, alternatively, between Israel and the Roman Empire? Without exaggeration, one could say that the whole history of the interpretation of Luke-Acts unfolds from this problematic. Anyone who wants to

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<sup>6</sup> Schubert 1968: 260–61.

<sup>7</sup> Dupont 1984: 384–385. Cf. Also Vielhauer (1966: 34) and Schneider (1982: 231).

<sup>8</sup> The importance of this point is underestimated by Rowe, who concludes that the assessment of those scholars is due to 'the academic inclination of the interpreters in questions that has led them to value the explicitly philosophical speech above other parts of the narrative' (Rowe 2009: 191, n.82). For Luke as the first Christian historian, cf. Marguerat 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See, however, Fitzmyer (1998: 601) who calls it a 'major speech,' and Schnabel (2005: 176) who describes it as 'a key passage in the Book of Acts.' Rothschild (2014: 1) speaks of 'a literary crest of the overall narrative.'

<sup>10</sup> As Johnson (1992: 319) rightly notes: 'It is not the end of the book, not its singular climax, but another in a series of symbolic encounters between the word of the gospel and the many aspects of the world it was destined to transform.'

establish the theological aim of Luke's writing must first determine how the author positions Christianity in relation to Judaism and in relation to the pagan world.<sup>11</sup>

The pericope of Acts 17 has thus played an important role in scholarship's attempt to understand Acts' attitude towards the Gentiles, the Graeco-Roman world more generally, and thus Luke's overall purpose in writing the Acts of the Apostles.

For example, for Marguerat, Acts 17 is 'window on Luke's purpose to present 'a Christianity between Jerusalem and Rome' and illustrates his 'theological programme of integration.'<sup>12</sup> According to the Swiss scholar, the author of Acts has composed a speech which can be read from a Greek and a Jewish perspective until verse 31, thus underscoring that God is the God of the Greek and the Jew.<sup>13</sup> Luke uses this device of semantic ambivalence several times in his work in the service of his theological project of presenting 'Christianity as both the fulfilment of the promises of Scriptures and as the answer to the religious quest of the Graeco-Roman world.'<sup>14</sup>

Very differently, Jacob Jervell sees the speech as wholly condemnatory of the Gentiles. Not only so, but the discourse – which is the only substantial speech delivered to a broader Gentile audience in Acts – is *not* a missionary speech, for it does *not* present the gospel. For Jervell this substantiates his thesis articulated since the 1970s over against the then general tendency among scholars to read Acts as an anti-Jewish and pro-Roman document. Indeed, according to him, the book of Acts is not concerned with the progress of the gospel among Gentiles outside of the synagogue, but only among Jews and God-fearers.<sup>15</sup> According to this interpretation then, Graeco-Roman culture cannot in any way serve as a preparation for, or an ally in, the proclamation of the gospel. Only the Jewish context – i.e. the synagogue – and the Jewish Scriptures serve this function for Luke.

Another reading has been advanced recently by Kavin Rowe in an article published in *NTS* in 2011. Arguing against the interpretation of the Areopagus speech (Acts 17:16–34) as an attempt at theological rapprochement (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) between Christianity and Greek philosophy, Rowe proposes that it describes a fundamentally different grammar for the whole of life which conflicts with pagan tradition. The message presented by the speech in Athens is

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<sup>11</sup> Marguerat 2004: 65.

<sup>12</sup> Marguerat 2004: 65–66. Marguerat develops this thesis in his essay 'A Christianity between Jerusalem and Rome' in Marguerat 2004, and in his commentary (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Marguerat 2004: 71–72.

<sup>14</sup> Marguerat 2004: 76.

<sup>15</sup> Jervell 1998: 455: 'Dies liegt daran, dass die Heidenmission für Lukas nicht mit der Areopagrede und dem ausserjüdischen Heidentum zusammenhängt, sondern mit den Gottesfürchtigen in den Synagogen. Lukas hat also die knappen Nachrichten aus dem Bericht des Paulus in Athen VV 16f. und 34 zu einer Szene ausgestaltet, die das Nein der Kirche zum ausserjüdischen Heidentum darlegt.' Cf. Jervell 1972.

thus fundamentally in conflict with Greek philosophical teaching. Rowe's article was an extension of his treatment of the Areopagus speech in his book *World Upside Down* (2009), where he defends the thesis that the book of Acts depicts the early Christian movement as subversive of Graeco-Roman culture, but emphatically innocent of political sedition.

A final example is provided by Joshua Jipp's article published in *JBL* two years later, where he contends that Luke has composed a speech which resonates with *both* Jewish and Greek traditions, thereby appropriating elements of Greek culture both to criticize aspects of it, and to exalt 'the Christian movement as comprising the best features of Greco-Roman philosophical sensibilities.'<sup>16</sup> Jipp points out that this reading corroborates other scholarly contributions on Acts which have highlighted the way Luke appropriates elements of Graeco-Roman script and culture, mimicking aspects of it in order to demonstrate that the Christian movement contains the best aspects of Graeco-Roman tradition and criticize competing movements.<sup>17</sup>

As those examples show, Acts 17 has become a window or a test case through which Luke's view of early Christianity's relation to the Gentiles and Graeco-Roman culture – including its politics, philosophy, and piety – is assessed; this perspective then is thought to shed important light on his literary purpose. At the same time, the strong differences and even incongruity between those interpretations of Acts 17 draws attention to the enduring conundrum which has marked the history of interpretation of this fascinating episode: the tension between the discourse's criticism of the Athenians' religion as 'ignorance' and idolatry, and yet the speech's apparent appeal to Greek philosophical religious common places to articulate the Christian message. As a result, the Areopagus speech's stance towards the Graeco-Roman world and pagan religiosity in particular has long been interpreted in very different and even radically opposite ways. At one end of the spectrum interpreters argue that the speech is to be understood along the lines of an anti-idol polemic denouncing the idolatry of the Athenians. The discourse is thus critical of Athenian religiosity through and through.<sup>18</sup> At the other end, the speech is interpreted as a discourse on the true knowledge of God which, building upon the 'inkling' of the notion of the true God demonstrated by Athenian religiosity and/or philosophy, presents the true and only God to the Athenians and corrects their misunderstandings.<sup>19</sup>

To shed new light on this enduring debate, the present project suggests a fresh perspective on this pericope based on a different approach to the 'Greek' material included in the speech. Before describing the approach taken in the

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<sup>16</sup> Jipp 2012: 576 and 568 respectively.

<sup>17</sup> Jipp 2012: 569.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Gärtner 1955; Dunn 1996; Jervell 1998.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Dibelius 1939; Haenchen 1971.

present work, however, it will be helpful to discuss some of the ways past scholarship has interpreted the speech's use and allusions to Greek philosophy, and to assess whether those approaches have led to a convincing interpretation of the discourse in Athens.

## 1.2 Some Main Lines in Past Scholarship

At least since the time of Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215 CE), exegetes have noticed the presence of Greek material and echoes to philosophy in the Areopagus speech.<sup>20</sup> Apart from the explicit quote from Aratus who is referred to as 'one of the poets' of the Athenians in v. 28, several motifs of the speech recall Greek philosophical formulations, such as the assertion that the divinity does not live in temples, that it has no need, or the reference to the divine appointment of seasons. While the great majority of exegetes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has concurred that the speech in Athens is hellenized, there has been wide disagreement as to the extent or nature of this hellenization, and how it is to be interpreted in this pericope.<sup>21</sup> This section discusses some of the main ways this phenomenon has been interpreted since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, highlighting some of the problems and methodological concerns created by past approaches but also how some contributions point towards a new possibility to examine this question.<sup>22</sup>

### 1.2.1 Jewish-Christian Grundmotiv and Stoic Begleitmotiv (Norden)

It is Eduard Norden who, with *Agnostos Theos* (1913), brought the question of the relationship between Jewish and Greek material in the speech to the fore of scholarly discussion. Norden saw the discourse in Athens as reflecting a tradition of mission speeches on the true knowledge of God. Highlighting the many parallels between the speech in Athens and the other speeches in Acts, he argued that the discourse is composed of a basic '*jüdisch-christliches*

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<sup>20</sup> Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* 1.19 is the earliest attestation to an identification of a quotation from Aratus' *Phaenomena* in Acts 17:28.

<sup>21</sup> 'Hellenization' is used in a broad sense, and includes, for example, the adoption of Greek form, argumentation, terminology or authors.

<sup>22</sup> The literature on this pericope is almost endless, but reviews of past scholarship remain almost non-existent, even in the two unique (!) monographs consecrated to this passage (Gärtner 1955; Rothschild 2014). To my knowledge, the most complete overview of scholarship is found in Zweck's unpublished dissertation, where he traces what scholars have said about natural revelation in Acts 17 (1985: 1–37). See also the overview in Dupont 1984: 396–403. Our analysis neither seeks comprehensiveness nor to differentiate between all nuances adopted by past exegetes. Rather it focuses on some of the major interpretations which have been or are still influential in scholarship, or contributions which are particularly helpful for our methodological reflection in the next section.

*Grundmotiv*’ into which has been inserted ‘*ein stoisches Begleitmotiv*’ which represents an adaptation of this basic motif to the Hellenistic audience at hand. This *Begleitmotiv*, expressed in verses 26–28, refers to the assertion that although the divine is invisible, its existence is revealed through the visible world, a common theme in Hellenistic philosophy and especially in Stoicism. According to Norden, the author of the speech inherited the practice of including Greek knowledge about the divine from Hellenistic Judaism, which often used support from Greek philosophers who had criticized popular conceptions of the gods in their anti-idol polemics. In particular, the Stoa and its pantheism provided an easy bridge to Jewish and Christian monotheism. For Norden, this arrangement between Jewish-Christian and philosophical motifs reflects an adaptation of the apostolic preaching to its Hellenistic audience, a practice which was anticipated in Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>23</sup>

Although several of Norden’s other proposals in *Agnostos Theos* failed to convince exegetes,<sup>24</sup> his explanation of the speech in terms of a Jewish-Christian main motif into which are integrated Stoic motifs set the debate on the relationship between Jewish and Greek material in the speech on the agenda of scholarly discussion on the Areopagus for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and many scholars were to view the relationship between Jewish and Greek motifs along similar lines.

### 1.2.2 *A Philosophical Sermon on the Knowledge of God (Dibelius, Pohlenz, Balch)*

While Norden had interpreted the philosophical material of the speech as a *Begleitmotiv* integrated in a typical missionary speech, Dibelius (1939) argued that the whole speech is a *philosophical sermon* on the true knowledge of God.<sup>25</sup> Departing from Norden’s form criticism and the question of the influence of tradition on the speech, Dibelius began his analysis with the discourse itself which he saw as a ‘*sinnvolles Ganzes*’ whose composition had been significantly shaped by the author. Starting with verses 26–27, he interpreted them as a reference to the manifestation of divine providence in the arrangement of the seasons and the habitable zones of the earth which, in philosophy, serve as proofs of divine existence and providence and ‘are intended to induce men to seek after God.’<sup>26</sup> He thus concluded that the rest of the speech must also be interpreted against this philosophical background to become intelligible.

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<sup>23</sup> Norden 1913: 29.

<sup>24</sup> Norden’s thesis that Acts 17 was inserted in Acts by a second-century writer who composed it based on a speech from Apollonius of Tyana failed to convince exegetes. See especially Harnack’s refutation (1913).

<sup>25</sup> Dibelius 1956b: 26–77.

<sup>26</sup> Dibelius 1956a: 34.

Dibelius did not deny that some themes in the speech come originally from the Old Testament, such as the affirmation that God is the creator of the world or that he does not live in temples. But he argued that those themes have been hellenized. For example, the speech uses the terminology of *cosmos* rather than the terminology of ‘heaven and earth’ as does the Old Testament. Likewise, the *via negationis* way of talking about God, such as the assertion that he does not need anything, although it came to be used in Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity, originates from Greek philosophy rather than from the Old Testament. Dibelius also saw verse v. 28 as affirming a panentheistic worldview and thus depicting humanity’s relationship with God in a way which totally departs from the Old Testament.<sup>27</sup>

Importantly then, for Dibelius, it is ‘not only subsidiary motifs’ which are derived from Stoicism in the speech, but its main idea, which is that knowledge of God can be attained through nature and humanity’s inner knowledge of God. He thus concluded that ‘the Areopagus speech is a Hellenistic speech with a Christian ending.’<sup>28</sup> This led the German scholar to the strange and now famous conclusion that the speech is ‘a foreign body’ not only in Acts but in the whole New Testament. For stylistic reasons, however, Dibelius nonetheless believed that the speech is the composition of the author of Acts who thus pens a paradigmatic sermon on how one should preach to the Gentiles around 90 CE.

Following Dibelius, several scholars continued to interpret the speech in Acts 17 as essentially describing a philosophical argument about the knowledge of God, although they sometimes challenged his interpretation of parts of the speech.<sup>29</sup> Most influentially, Max Pohlenz, who argued that the speech has strong similarities with the teachings of the Stoic Posidonius (c. 135 BCE – c. 51 BCE), presented several modifications to Dibelius’ interpretation but concurred with him that the subject of the speech is ‘eine heidnische Theorie der natürlichen Gotteserkenntnis.’<sup>30</sup> For him, the Christian speech simply overtakes this Stoic doctrine as an attempt to seek common ground with his Gentile audience, as its mention of the verse from Aratus in v. 28 demonstrates.<sup>31</sup>

In the decades which followed, Dibelius and Pohlenz were regularly criticized for underestimating the importance of the Old Testament background of the speech.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, later scholars confirmed that the ‘Greek’ or ‘Stoic’ ideas identified in the speech were already present in Hellenistic Jewish

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<sup>27</sup> Dibelius 1956a: 52. For Dibelius, what the speech affirms at this point has nothing to do with the OT idea that humanity is created in God’s image.

<sup>28</sup> Dibelius 1956a: 57–58.

<sup>29</sup> Pohlenz 1949, Vielhauer 1950–1951, Eltester 1957, Hommel 1955.

<sup>30</sup> Pohlenz 1949: 95.

<sup>31</sup> Pohlenz 1949: 89–90. Note that Pohlenz points out that the speech uses Stoic teaching to teach the Christian God and not the Stoic one. The speech thus reinterprets Aratus theistically.

<sup>32</sup> See 1.2.3 and 1.2.4 below.