

Spirits Provoked, Bodies Raised

A Sermon in Athens

A visual guide of the sites of Athens, Greece, and their connection to Paul's preaching of the resurrection from the dead

The Areopagus



Photo 1. This view (looking to the E/SE) shows the position of the Areopagus (red arrow) in relation to the Acropolis (larger hill in the background). The Parthenon (temple to Athena) is the largest structure on the Acropolis (yellow arrow).

Name

Areopagus is a name meaning “hill of Ares.” We call it Mars Hill because the Roman equivalent to the Greek God Ares is Mars. Ares was the brother of Athena, to whom was dedicated the massive temple on top of the Acropolis—the Parthenon.

Function

The Areopagus was a site of trials (early homicide trials, for example, were held here). Eventually, the governing council in Athens, Greece, became known as the *Areopagus* because of this original meeting place.



Photo 2. Walkway at base of Mars Hill. (You can still see sherds of ancient pottery scattered on the ground at the base of the hill).

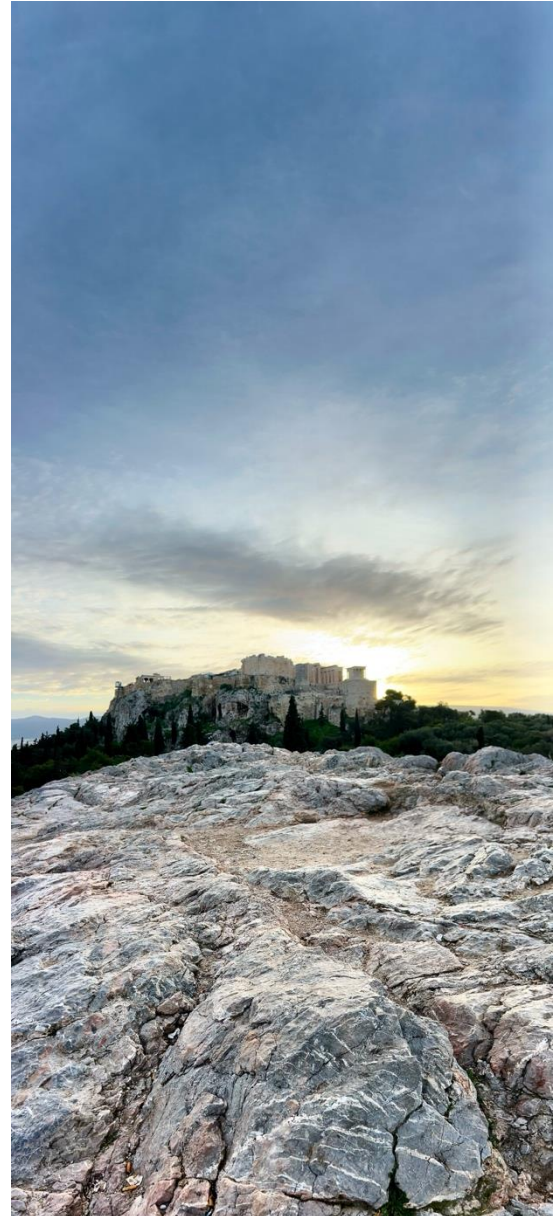


Photo 3. Sunrise over the Acropolis as viewed from the Areopagus. Temple to Athena Nike visible at right.

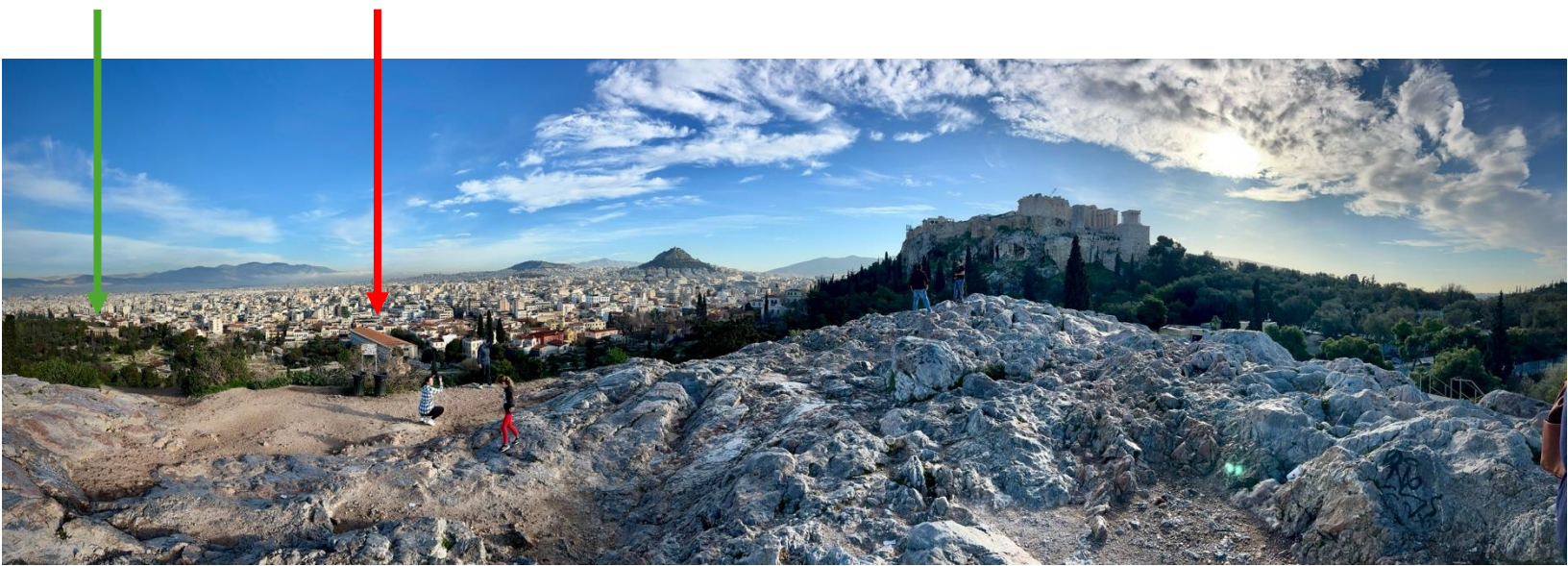


Photo 4. Panoramic view of Athens from the Areopagus. The green arrow on the left side of the photo shows the Temple of Hephaestus, at one end of the agora (marketplace) where Paul was arguing with the philosophers and religious leaders. The red area is pointing to the Stoa of Attalos at the other side (the colonnade I was walking while talking about Stoic philosophers).



Photo 5. View of the Areopagus from entrance to the Acropolis. You can see people standing on the Areopagus (yellow arrow).



Photo 6. Plaque at the main entrance to Mars Hill, commemorating Paul's sermon. The text is Acts 17:22–31 in Greek.

Paul's Sermon

Acts 17:22–31 (NASB95)

²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³ “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things; ²⁶ and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ ²⁹ “Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰ “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent, ³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”



Photo 7. Panorama of sunset on Mars Hill.

Questions to Consider

1. In what way(s) does seeing sites mentioned in the Bible help your
 - a. Understanding?
 - b. Imagination?
 - c. Faith?
2. Consider the physical location of Paul's sermon (take a look at the photo above to gain a better appreciation of what could be seen from this vantage point). Look again at Acts 17:22–31. What specifics do you see that might resonate with the audience hearing these words in this location?
3. What other elementary principles of the oracles of God are present in Acts 17:16ff?



Photo 8. Modern vagrants atop Mars Hill.

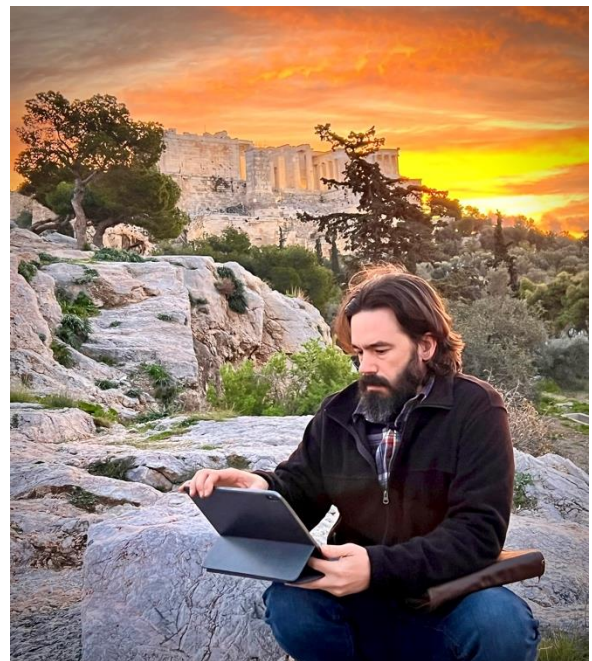


Photo 9. Sunrise on Mars Hill.

The Acropolis

An *acropolis* is a high place (lit. “highest city”), and each Greek city would have had an acropolis. The Athenian Acropolis is famous for its sites of religious, cultural, and architectural significance. The picture below is an artist’s stylized rendition of the Acropolis as viewed from Mars Hill. This image gives an idea of some of the elements now missing (like the statue of Athena) or the colored façade. Note, also, the stylized representation of a developed Areopagus in the foreground.



Figure 1. *The Acropolis at Athens* by Leo von Klenze (1784–1864). Painted in 1846.

The Parthenon

The most famous installation of the Acropolis is the Parthenon, temple to the goddess Athena. Given the numerous destructions and reconstructions (coupled with the overwhelming amount of religious activity here), there is debate on the usage and timeline for this structure. It was about 500 years old by the time the Apostle Paul would have seen it. What we see today is basically the shell of the former site (for example, it would have originally had a wooden roof). The Acropolis was razed in 480 B.C., and this version of the Parthenon was completed in 432. Most destruction took place in 1687, when a Venetian mortar landed inside the Parthenon, which was being used by Turkish forces to store ... gunpowder.

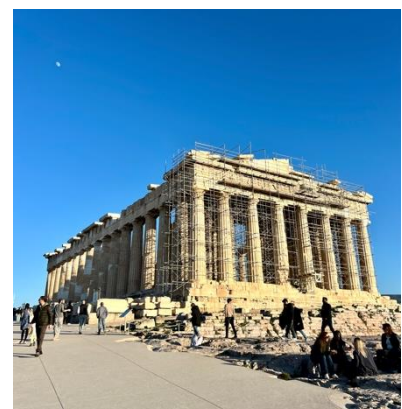


Photo 10. Parthenon as seen upon entering through main gate. Scaffolding of current preservation efforts can be seen.



Photo 11. Sun setting on the Parthenon. The lighter coloration within the marble shows areas of restoration, the 17th-century bombing having knocked down many of the columns. Early reconstruction efforts sometimes caused further damage to the structure. Current efforts are underway to reconstruct the cella (inner chamber) of the Parthenon.



Photo 12. The Acropolis at night.

The Asclepieion

The Asclepieion refers to the sanctuary of Asclepios (god of medicine, son of Apollo) and his daughter, Hygieia (where we get the term *hygiene*), which included the Temple of Asclepios. The sanctuary was built in the 5th century B.C., with the temple constructed in the 1st century B.C. People would have visited this site to be healed.



Photo 13. Terracotta body parts found near an asclepieion in Corinth, Greece. These were either offerings of gratitude or appeals to heal specific ailments.



Photo 14. Temple of Asclepios.

Temple of Athena Nike

Nike is the goddess of victory, often depicted with wings. Consider this depiction and the quote from Plato:

At the end of life they will have full-grown wings and cast off the burdens of the flesh: they will stand victorious in the first bout of a truly Olympian victory.

— Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*

It is this temple that is the most easily-seen structure from where I was speaking on Mars Hill.



Photo 15. Temple of Athena Nike at edge of Acropolis.

The Erechtheion



Photo 16. View of Erechtheion looking north. South Porch of the Maidens visible to left.

This structure is a good example of just how much of a religious hodgepodge Athens was. It seems to be a series of buildings, and there is debate regarding names and boundaries. It served as joint worship of at least Athena and Poseidon. Some argue that it housed an assortment of cult curiosities.

The floor plan to the right shows the outline of the buildings shown in the photo. The sanctuary at the far left was dedicated to the daughter of the first king of Athens, who is purportedly buried near/underneath the structure (which was probably built prior to the Erechtheion). You can see that in that sanctuary was an altar to Zeus as well as the olive tree said to be present to Athens by Athena.

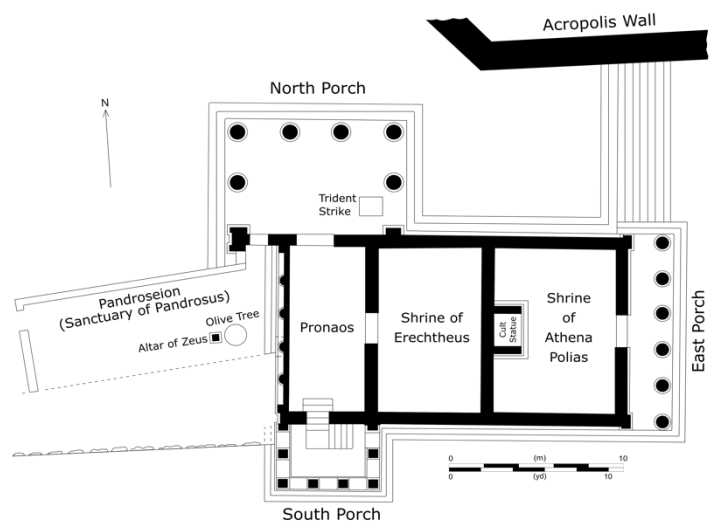


Figure 2. Floor plan of Erechtheion. CC by SA-40.



Photo 17. View of Erechtheion from north, showing North Porch and replanted olive tree.

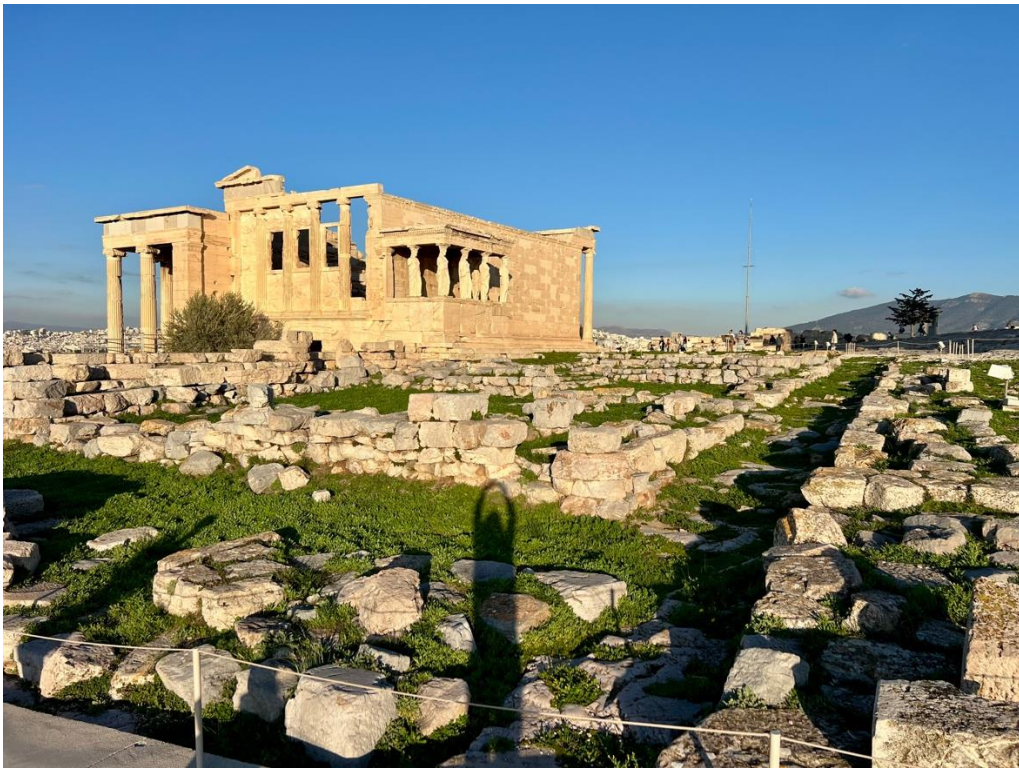


Photo 18. The Erechtheion is built adjacent to the old temple of Athena, whose foundation rocks can be seen in the foreground.

Questions to Consider

1. The buildings of the Acropolis are a dominant presence, both those that tower above the surrounding landscape, and those that you would only see if you were to scale the hill (like the Asclepieion, which is situated on the lower “back” portion of the Acropolis). What influence do our surroundings have on our reaction to circumstances? Consider how they influenced Paul—how they “provoked his spirit.” What are the range of emotions and possible reactions in a situation like this? Are there modern parallels?
2. Consider that Paul is preaching the resurrection of the dead, while just on the other side of the Acropolis people are visiting temples to be healed (Asclepieion). What does the temple activity at the Asclepieion reveal about Greek thought regarding the body?
3. The Acropolis, like most ancient sites, consists of physical ruin stacked upon physical ruin. How might this context provide setting for Paul’s message?

The Agora



Photo 19. Viewing the agora from Mars Hill. Long building with orange roof to the right is the Stoa of Attalos. The temple on the left side is the Temple of Hephaestus.

“Very Religious in All Respects”

The photos you see below are all in proximity. To give you an idea of scale, a 30 m x 30 m square would touch the entrance to each site.

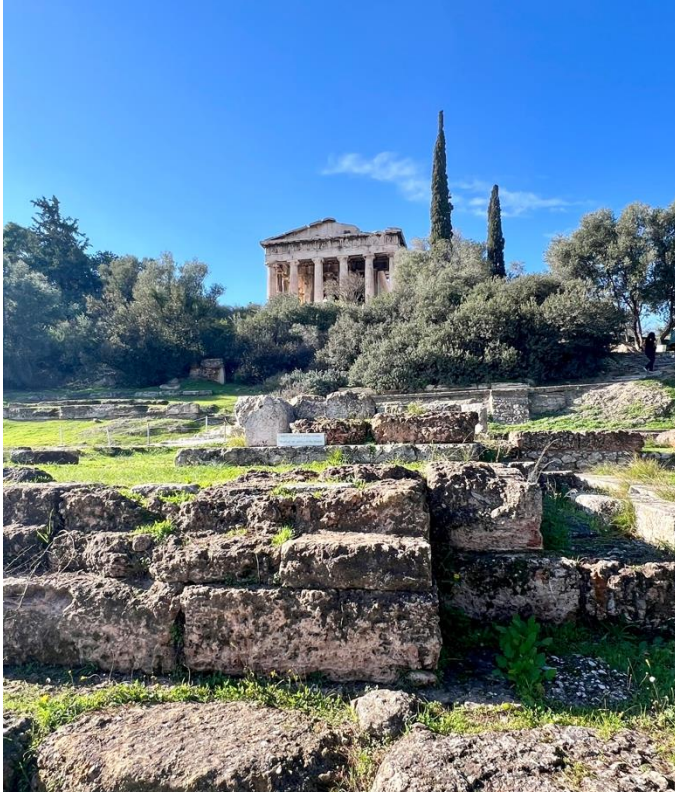


Photo 20. Temple of Apollo.

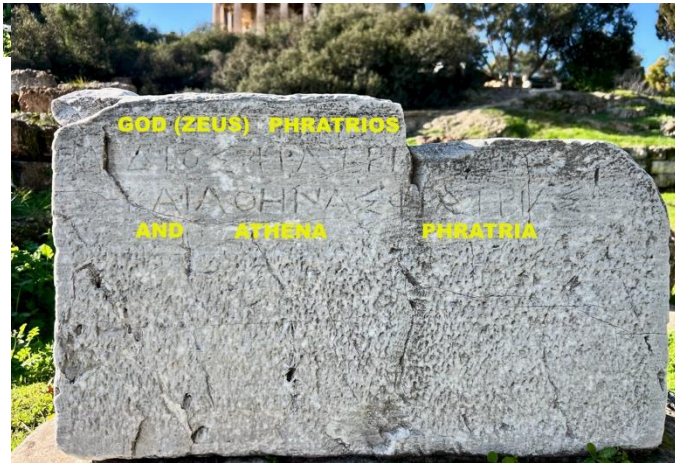


Photo 21. Inscription from temple honoring Zeus and Athena.



Photo 22. Altar of Ares.

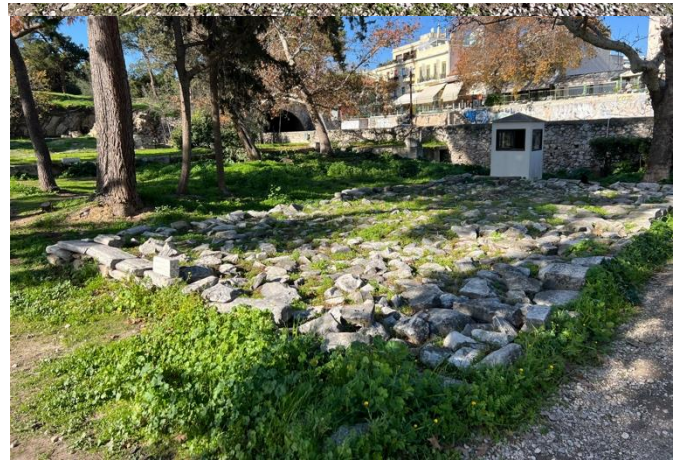


Photo 23. Altar of Zeus.

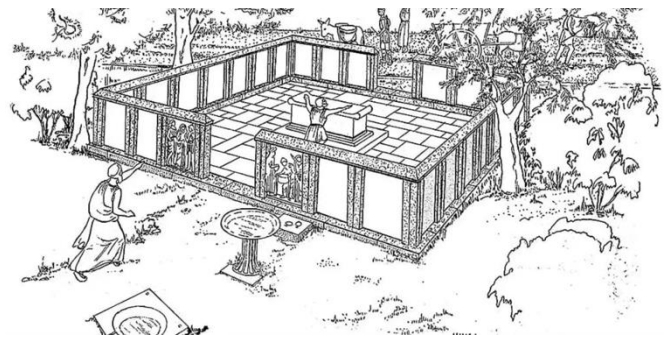


Figure 3. Recreation of Altar of the 12 Gods.

Temple of Hephaestus



Photo 24. Temple of Hephaestus surrounded by olive trees. (Green parakeets were squawking in the olive trees.)



Photo 25. The mansion at Arlington National Cemetery is inspired by the Temple of Hephaestus (nps.gov).



Photo 26. Temple of Hephaestus.

Hephaestus is the god of craftsmen. Consider this temple's dominant placement at the agora alongside Paul's bold statement:

Acts 17:24–25, 29 (NASB95)

²⁴ The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things ...

²⁹ Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.

Within this temple would have stood two bronze statues, one of Hephaestus and the other of Athena.

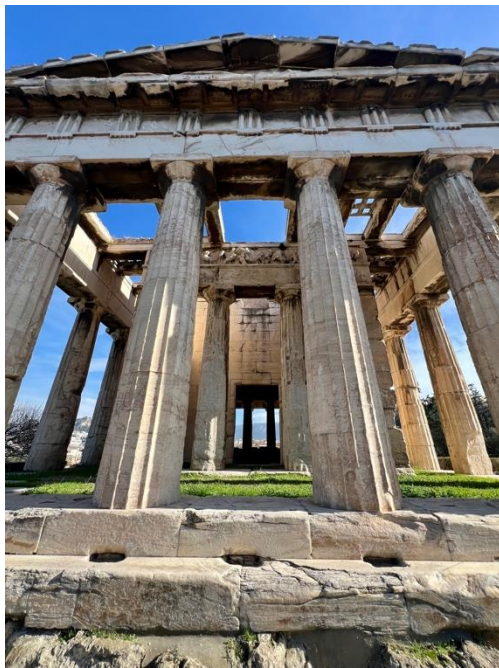


Photo 27. Temple of Hephaestus.

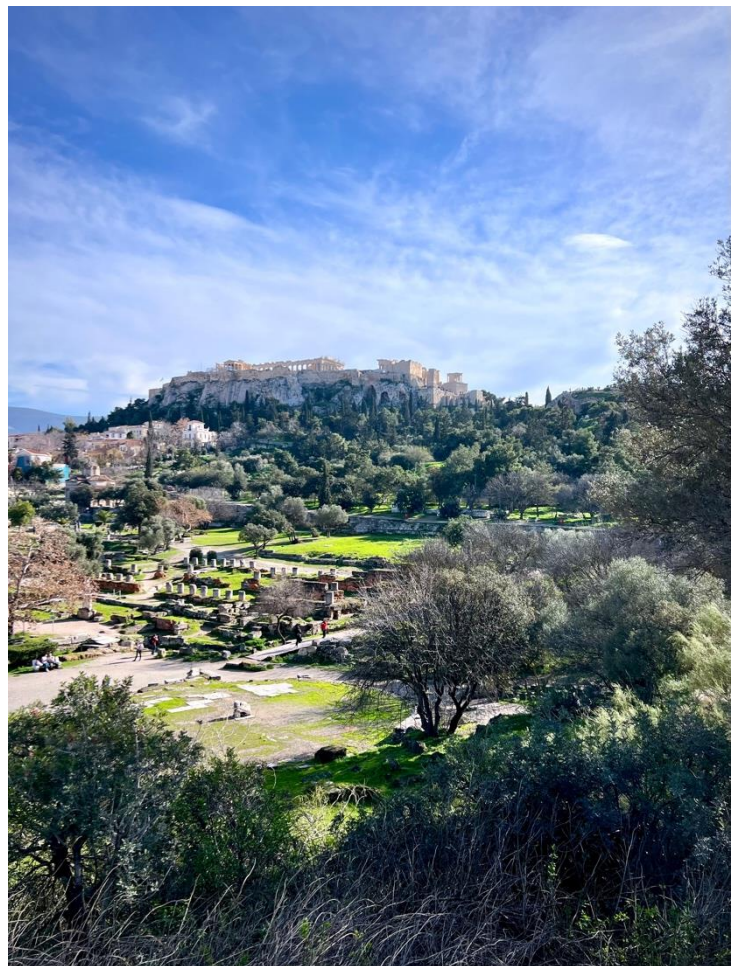


Photo 28. View of the Agora, Areopagus, and Acropolis from the steps of the Temple of Hephaestus.

Philosophers and Poets in Light of Ancient Greek Thought

Acts 17:27–28 (NASB95)

²⁷ . . . that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, “**For we also are His children.**”

Paul is quoting the Greek writer Aratus, who wrote:

From Zeus let us begin; him do we mortals never leave unnamed; full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men; full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus. **For we are also his offspring**; and he in his kindness unto men giveth favourable signs and wakeneth the people to work, reminding them of livelihood.¹

The Gods of Olympus

These are the gods of Olympus with some of their areas of oversight and passages in which they are mentioned in Scripture:

1. Zeus (chief god, sky; Acts 14:8–15)
2. Hera (consort of Zeus, queen of heaven; marriage, women, family)
3. Poseidon (sea, horse, earthquakes)
4. Demeter (agriculture)
5. Apollo (sun, archery, music)
6. Artemis (animals, hunting, chastity, childbirth; Acts 19:23–28)
7. Ares (battle, violence)
8. Athena (reason, wisdom, war)
9. Hephaestus (craftsmen)
10. Aphrodite (love, sex, beauty)
11. Hermes (livestock, messenger god, travel; Acts 14:8–15)
12. Dionysus (wine, pleasure)

¹ *Phaenomena*, translated by G. R. Mair; <https://www.theoi.com/Text/AratusPhaenomena.html>.

Epicurus, Zeno, and Plato

Mentioned this morning were 3 philosophers. Here is a general characterization of their philosophies as it relates to what we're studying.

Plato (5th-4th century B.C.)

Believed the material world was only an "image" or "copy" of the "real" world (the world of forms); believed in the immortality of the soul, which was the source of life and the mind; believed in an eternal universe.

Epicurus (4th-3rd century B.C.)

Rejection of Platonism; believe the body and soul ceased to live after death; happiness should be sought in this life (his pursuit of happiness is often mistaken as Hedonism); believed in an infinite and eternal universe; believed gods to be uninterested in human affairs.

Though the work no longer exists, older philosophical works attribute the modern problem of evil to Epicurus: Is God not able or willing to deal with evil?

Zeno (4th-3rd century B.C.) (Stoicism)

Taught in public place as opposed to practice of Epicureans; emphasized life ordered by reason and in harmony with nature; materialistic view of reality (only bodies exist; the soul is a type of body); cyclical and deterministic view of nature; view of God was more of an organizing force (logos) than a personal deity.



Photo 29. The colonnade from which I spoke regarding Stoic philosophers, the Stoa of Attalos. The stoa is about 375 feet long, and was operational by 150 B.C.

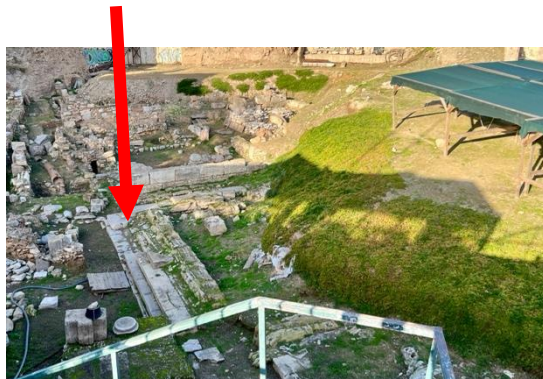


Photo 30. The Painted Stoa used by Zeno sits beneath a spot within the city. (The same roadway that interrupts the Altar of the 12 Gods runs between this stoa and that altar.) You can see the edge of the stoa marked by the arrow. Current archaeological excavation is ongoing.

Homer

Consider the following passages from Homer. The first comes from the *Iliad*; hear the words of Achilles, who encounters his dead friend Patroclus:

Achilles held out his arms to clasp the spirit, but in vain. It vanished like a wisp of smoke and went gibbering underground. Achilles leapt up in amazement. He beat his hands together and in his desolation cried: “Ah then, it is true that something of us does survive even in the Halls of Hades, but with no intellect at all, only the ghost and semblance of a man: for all night long the ghost of poor Patroclus (and it looked exactly like him) has been standing at my side, weeping and wailing, and telling me of all the things I ought to do.”²

The second comes from the *Odyssey*, and again is the words of Achilles, who is now dead and is speaking with the living Odysseus:

Never try to reconcile me to death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, some landless man with hardly enough to live on, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.”³



Photo 31. Statues recovered from the agora showing personifications of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*.

² *Il.* 23.99-107 (tr. Rieu), in N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 40.

³ *Od.* 11.488-91, in Wright, 42.

Questions to Consider

1. How does seeing the number of religious artifacts in Athens inform your view of the Pauls' task?
2. Consider the space our own church occupies (and the multiple churches next to it). What parallels and contrasts can you draw about religious space and cultural interaction?
3. Consider the particulars of the references to religious beliefs, quotes, and philosophies listed above. What connections can you make to Paul's sermon?
 - a. Pauls' quotation referencing Zeus
 - b. The gods of Olympus and their respective domains
 - c. Platonic philosophy
 - d. Epicurean philosophy
 - e. Stoic philosophy
 - f. Homeric poems