

# Paul the Middle Platonist? Exegetical Traditions on *Timaeus* 28c and the Characterization of Paul in Acts 17:16–31\*

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## ■ Abstract

Paul's speech to the Areopagus in Acts 17 places the apostle in philosophical dialogue with Stoics and Epicureans. This article identifies important points of contact between Paul's speech and Middle Platonic exegesis of a famous Platonic phrase from *Timaeus* 28c. There, the philosopher declares that the maker and father of the world is hard to find, and even more difficult to talk about. Many later interpreters of Plato commented on the dictum. Middle Platonists such as Plutarch mused about the theological implications of naming god both "maker" and "father." Jewish and Christian interpreters like Philo and Justin employed Plato's phrase to describe their access to divine revelation. The first portion of this article argues that the Areopagus speech contains evidence of similar exegesis, both in its references to god's roles as maker and father and in Paul's claim to declare the unknown god. These resonances do more than clarify the author's philosophical background; they also have previously unexplored implications for our understanding of Paul's characterization in Acts 17. The second half of the article argues that in aligning Paul with the Platonic tradition, the author participates in an established Greco-Roman practice of depicting the Platonists, Stoics, and Epicureans in theological dialogue.

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## ■ Keywords

Middle Platonism, Acts, philosophy, Paul, Stoicism

## ■ Introduction

Paul's address to the Areopagus in Acts 17 is among the most studied passages in the book of Acts.<sup>1</sup> It lies at the intersection of several distinct approaches to the text. A previous generation of scholars waged a vigorous debate over the historicity of the speech, whether it is consonant with the theology of the historical Paul as reconstructed from his letters.<sup>2</sup> A different line of inquiry relates to the study of the speech's philosophical sources: what texts (if any) is the author quoting or alluding to in Paul's famous sermon to the Athenian philosophers?<sup>3</sup> Yet another approach explores how the speech contributes to Paul's characterization within the narrative: Is Paul being characterized as a Stoic philosopher critiquing other Stoics?<sup>4</sup> As a Socrates or Epimenides redivivus?<sup>5</sup> As a distinctly Jewish and/or Christian apologist?<sup>6</sup>

This study aims to synthesize two approaches to Paul's Areopagus speech mentioned above: the question of sources and the question of Paul's characterization within the narrative. It is my thesis that elements of the Areopagus speech cohere closely with the exegetical traditions on a famous Platonic dictum from *Tim.* 28c. While such allusions within the speech are usually adduced to elucidate the author's own philosophical background, I argue that the speech's alignment with Platonic traditions offers crucial clarification regarding the function of the narrative itself.

<sup>1</sup> In Kavin Rowe's words, the secondary literature on the speech is "almost endless." See C. Kavin Rowe, "The Grammar of Life: The Areopagus Speech and Pagan Tradition," *NTS* 57 (2011) 31–50, at 31.

<sup>2</sup> For a good summary of such scholarship, see the still relevant discussion of Martin Dibelius, "Paul on the Areopagus," in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. Heinrich Greeven; London: SCM, 1956) 26–78, at 26–27.

<sup>3</sup> This question is taken up most recently and in most detail by Clare Rothschild, *Paul in Athens: The Popular Religious Context of Acts 17* (WUNT 341; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), who updates the argument for reading v. 28a as a citation from Epimenides of Crete. See also Kirsopp Lake, "Note XX: Your Own Poets," in *The Beginnings of Christianity* (ed. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake; 5 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1933) 5:246–51.

<sup>4</sup> So David Balch, "The Areopagus Speech: An Appeal to the Stoic Historian Posidonius against Later Stoics and the Epicureans," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 52–79.

<sup>5</sup> For the former, see Karl Olav Sandnes, "Paul and Socrates: The Aim of Paul's Areopagus Speech," *JSNT* 50 (1993) 3–26, who is followed by Joshua Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16–34 as Both Critique and Propaganda," *JBL* 131 (2012) 567–88. For the latter, see Rothschild, *Paul in Athens*.

<sup>6</sup> For a study emphasizing the Jewish elements of the speech, see Bertil Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (trans. Carolyn Hannay-King; ASNU 21; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1955). For the speech as a uniquely Christian formulation, see Rowe, "The Grammar of Life," 31–50.

The article proceeds in three sections. First, I briefly survey the influence of *Tim.* 28c in antiquity and identify verbal similarities between Plato's dictum and the Areopagus speech. Next, I compare interpretations of *Tim.* 28c found in Plutarch, Philo, and Justin Martyr with key statements from the Areopagus speech, where I observe more substantial overlaps. Finally, drawing on evidence from the narrative setting of Paul's debate with Epicureans and Stoics, as well as evidence of similar philosophical debates in Cicero and Plutarch, I suggest that the author of Acts deftly alludes to *Tim.* 28c to situate Paul within the Platonic tradition.<sup>7</sup>

### ■ Paul's Areopagus Speech and the Text of *Timaeus* 28c

The *Timaeus* is widely regarded as the most influential of Plato's dialogues and one of the most significant philosophical works from antiquity. The subject of numerous ancient commentaries and countless exegetical citations, the *Timaeus* occupied a place of preeminence in discussions of cosmology and cosmogony. Direct citations of the *Timaeus* occur in such diverse authors as Aristotle, Cicero, Numenius, Apuleius, Plutarch, Philo, Justin Martyr, and Clement of Alexandria.<sup>8</sup> David Runia rightly notes that "no other philosophical work in antiquity was so widely disseminated and the subject of so much discussion as the *Timaeus*."<sup>9</sup>

Plato's popular account of the creation of the world in the *Timaeus* begins with an equally popular disclaimer: "Now to find the maker and father of the world is a task indeed, and, even when you've found him, declaring him to everyone is impossible" (τὸν μὲν οὖν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς εὐρεῖν τε ἔργον καὶ εὐρόντα

<sup>7</sup> As noted above, several previous studies have drawn connections between the Areopagus speech and Plato, and especially between the literary representations of Paul and Socrates (e.g., Sandnes, "Paul and Socrates," 3–26; Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 567–88; Hans-Josef Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles* [trans. Brian McNeil; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000] 76; J. Andrew Cowan, "Paul and Socrates in Dialogue: Points of Contact between the Areopagus Speech and the Apology," *NTS* 67 [2021] 121–33). My argument nuances the discussion of the Areopagus speech's relationship to Platonism by assessing parallels not only with Plato but also with several of his later interpreters. Similarities between the speech and Middle Platonism have also been observed in passing by F. E. Brenk, "Plutarch, Judaism, and Christianity," in *Studies in Plato and the Platonic Tradition: Essays Presented to John Whittaker* (ed. Mark Joyal; Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1997) 97–118, at 105–7. Brenk offers helpful observations but does not comment extensively on *Tim.* 28c or on the narrative consequences of these similarities. My argument thus interacts somewhat critically with Brenk's suggestions.

<sup>8</sup> Many of these instances are discussed in detail below. For a thorough review of the reception of the *Timaeus* from antiquity through the medieval period, see *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon* (ed. Gretchen J. Reydams-Schils; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> David Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (PhA 44; Leiden: Brill, 1986) 3. John Whittaker similarly notes that "the *Timaeus* was without a doubt not only the most frequently read dialogue of Plato, but in general the most influential work of a philosophical nature" (John Whittaker, "Plutarch, Platonism, and Christianity," in *Studies in Platonism and Patristic Thought* [ed. John Whittaker; London: Variorum Reprints, 1984] 50–63, at 57).

εἰς πάντα ἀδύνατον λέγειν).<sup>10</sup> This dictum enjoyed immense popularity among Plato's successors and was employed in a variety of exegetical and philosophical contexts in antiquity.<sup>11</sup> Henry Chadwick has famously termed it "perhaps the most hackneyed quotation" from all of Plato.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the saying's pessimistic assessment of humanity's ability to find god, by at least the first century BCE it had become a key text from which Platonists developed their theology and with which their opponents had to contend. In Cicero's *De natura deorum*, the importance of the *Timaeus* and especially *Tim. 28c* exerts a noticeable pressure on the argument of the Epicurean Velleius, who invokes *Tim. 28c* as representative of a fundamental distinction between his school and that of Plato (*Nat. d.* 1.30). The Middle Platonist Plutarch devotes an entire section of his *Platonicae Quaestiones* to *Tim. 28c*, probing the significance that the appellations "maker" and "father" entailed for Platonic theology.<sup>13</sup> Philo alludes to the phrase many times, once invoking the phrase as something "said by one of the ancients" (*Opif.* 21).<sup>14</sup> Numerous other examples could be adduced.<sup>15</sup>

For a good many authors in antiquity, to think about the nature of the divine and the creation of the world meant thinking alongside Plato, and *Tim. 28c* in particular.<sup>16</sup> We are thus justified in investigating whether or not Paul's theological address to the Athenian philosophers offers evidence for the author similarly thinking alongside Plato. In fact, elements of the Areopagus speech do resonate with both the form and content of *Tim. 28c*.<sup>17</sup> The search for direct verbal agreements yields admittedly modest results, but a few items are nonetheless worthy of attention.

Paul begins by proclaiming to the Athenians "the God who made the world."<sup>18</sup> As several commentators have noted in passing, this is not far from one of *Tim. 28c*'s two designations for the deity.<sup>19</sup> While Plato used the noun ποιητής, the author of

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Tim. 28c*; my translation. The Greek text is from Plato, *Volume 9: Timaeus; Critias; Cleitophon; Menexenus; Epistles* (trans. R. G. Bury; LCL 234; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929) 51.

<sup>11</sup> Runia has helpfully compiled a short summary of the phrase's variegated uses in his discussion of Philo's reception of the *Timaeus* (Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato*, 111).

<sup>12</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* (trans. with introduction and notes by Henry Chadwick; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 429 n. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Proclus's 4th-cent. commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* preserves similar musings from his predecessor Numenius. See Proclus, in *Tim.* 299.13–310.2.

<sup>14</sup> Runia rightly takes this as sufficient proof of Philo's "awareness of the Platonic provenance" (*Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato*, 109).

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Justin, *2 Apol.* 6.10; Numenius frag. 21; Apuleius, *De Plat.* 191; idem, *Apol.* 64.8.

<sup>16</sup> See again the summary in Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato*, 111; see also Arthur D. Nock "The Exegesis of *Tim. 28c*," *VC* 16 (1962) 79–86, at 79.

<sup>17</sup> See Brenk, "Plutarch, Judaism, and Christianity," 106.

<sup>18</sup> Unless otherwise noted, biblical citations are from the NRSV. The name "Paul" will be used throughout to refer to the speaker presumed in the narrative setting.

<sup>19</sup> See Brenk, "Plutarch, Judaism, and Christianity," 106; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 382; Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988) 141.

Acts uses the aorist participle ποιήσας, perhaps under the influence of Isa 42:5.<sup>20</sup> Of further significance is the use of κόσμος to denote the created order. The word is highly unusual in Luke-Acts, and several scholars have suggested that the author uses it to appeal to a philosophical audience.<sup>21</sup> Used in conjunction with “maker,” it could be evidence for the author’s awareness of Plato’s famous ποιητής τοῦ παντός, which the Middle Platonist Plutarch transmits as ποιητήν τοῦ κόσμου in one of his citations of *Tim.* 28c.<sup>22</sup> While the “God who made the world” fits naturally within a Jewish framework, from the perspective of the philosophers, this declaration would very likely have been evocative of Plato’s *Timaeus*.<sup>23</sup> Cicero’s Epicurean traces the concept of a world-building god uniquely to the *Timaeus*, contrasting it with a Stoic view of the world:

I am not going to expound to you doctrines that are mere baseless figments of the imagination, such as the artisan deity and world-builder of Plato’s *Timaeus*, or that old hag of a fortuneteller, the Pronoia . . . of the Stoics; nor yet a world endowed with a mind and senses of its own, a spherical, rotatory god of burning fire.<sup>24</sup>

Here and elsewhere in *De natura deorum*, Cicero draws a sharp distinction between the Platonist conception of a god who *made* the world and the Stoic

<sup>20</sup> However, a potential allusion to Isaiah should not be given undue weight. If the author does allude to Isa 42:5, Isaiah’s οὐρανός has been modified to the much more Greek-friendly κόσμος. Κόσμος is an extremely rare word in the vocabulary of Luke-Acts, and the author elsewhere has no qualms in reproducing similar phraseology from the LXX more accurately: “Lord, you are the maker of heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them” (Δέσποτα, σὺ ὁ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς, Acts 4:24; compare Ps 146:6). If the author is influenced by Isa 42:5, they have almost certainly adapted its wording to a philosophical context. For a more detailed appraisal of the speech’s relationship to Isa 42, see Jipp, “Paul’s Areopagus Speech,” 579, and David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (WUNT 2/130; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) 194–95. The use of a participle does not preclude a link between Acts 17:24 and *Tim.* 28c. The connection was already made by Philo. As Runia notes, Philo found the many LXX employments of the verb ποιέω for god’s creating activity as ample justification for conflating the ποιητής of *Tim.* 28c with Israel’s god (Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato*, 110). We might also note that *Tim.* 76c uses the present participle ὁ ποιῶν for the same creator god.

<sup>21</sup> Rothschild, *Paul in Athens*, 31 n. 41. This is the only occurrence of κόσμος in Acts. It occurs three times in Luke (9:25; 11:50; 12:30).

<sup>22</sup> “I am reassured when I hear Plato himself naming the uncreated and eternal god as the father and maker of the cosmos and of other created things” (ἀναθαρρῶ δὲ πάλιν αὐτοῦ Πλάτωνος ἀκούων πατέρα καὶ ποιητήν τοῦ τε κόσμου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων γεννητῶν τὸν ἀγέννητον καὶ ἄϊδιον θεὸν ὀνομαζόντος); Plutarch *Quaest. conv.* 718A (text and translation from Plutarch, *Moralia: Volume 9* [trans. Edwin L. Minar, Jr, F. H. Sandbach, and W. C. Helmbold; LCL 425; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961] 117).

<sup>23</sup> C. K. Barrett notes correctly that the Jewish notion of the world-making god finds its closest Greek parallel in Plato’s *Timaeus* (C. K. Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002] 269). Gestures to god as maker of course occur sporadically in non-Platonists (see Epictetus, *Dis.* 4.7.6). Nonetheless, the notion of a world-making god is appropriately associated with Platonic theology due to the massive influence of Plato’s *Timaeus* in antiquity.

<sup>24</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 1.18 (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* [trans. H. Rackham; LCL 268; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933] 21).

pantheism or panentheism that asserted that god *was* the world or permeated the world.<sup>25</sup> For Cicero at least, to defend the existence of a divine creator distinct from the universe was nothing less than to take up the position of Plato as expressed in the *Timaeus*.<sup>26</sup> From a philosophical perspective, the wording the author uses to affirm the creation of the cosmos by a singular divine being coheres closely with Plato's sentiment in *Tim.* 28c.<sup>27</sup>

Another possible point of contact lies in the two texts' use of the verb εὐρίσκω for humanity's search for god. According to Paul, humanity has been created "that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him" (εἰ ἄρα γε ψηλαφήσειαν αὐτὸν καὶ εὑροῖεν, Acts 17:27). The author's use of the optative indicates a pessimistic appraisal of humanity's chances of finding god. As Jipp remarks, it "indicates the gap between humanity and God and suggests the failure of this quest."<sup>28</sup> It emphasizes both the externality of god and humanity's separation from him. Bertil Gärtner reminds us that this too would have posed something of a stumbling block to Paul's Stoic interlocutors: "The Stoics could not have permitted so pessimistic a view of man's opportunities . . . did not the kinship with god guarantee man's finding him?"<sup>29</sup>

If Paul's sentiment is out of step with Stoicism, the same cannot be said for Platonism, for this is precisely what is expressed with the same verb in *Tim.* 28c.<sup>30</sup> Paul and Plato agree that finding god is a hard task for humanity. Humanity's separation from god, clearly asserted by Paul, coupled with god's status as maker

<sup>25</sup> See Cicero, *Nat. d.*, 2.30, 2.21, 1.52. The distinction is also made by Plutarch, *Stoic. rep.* 1052E–1053B. See also Whittaker, "Plutarch, Platonism, and Christianity," 50. Jipp also highlights the discrepancy between Paul's god and the god of the Stoics: "Two factors, however, suggest that the interpreter of this speech should be wary of assimilating Paul's speech too snugly within this Stoic outlook. First, it bears reminding that the Stoic view of god was decidedly materialistic and pantheistic. All of materiality, the world and humanity, derived from this kind of fiery pneumatic world principle" (Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 584). As David Sedley puts it, "the identification of god . . . with the world as a whole is a well-known thesis of Stoic ethics" (David Sedley, "The Origins of Stoic God," in *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, Its Background and Aftermath* [ed. Dorothea Frede and André Laks; PhA 88; Leiden: Brill, 2002] 41–84, at 47).

<sup>26</sup> Plato's insistence on the distinction between the creator god and the cosmos is also highlighted by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 3.71.

<sup>27</sup> See also Brenk, "Plutarch, Judaism, and Christianity," 106.

<sup>28</sup> Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 582. See also Dibelius, "Paul on the Areopagus," 34.

<sup>29</sup> Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech*, 158. The Stoics tended to emphasize the immanence of the divine and hence the ease with which humanity could access it. See Seneca, *Ep.* 41.1; Epictetus, *Dis.* 2.8; Cicero, *Nat. d.* 2.153.

<sup>30</sup> Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech*, 158. The received text of the *Timaeus* describes the act of finding god as a "task" (ἔργον); many later citations offer a modified reading: "not easy" (οὐθ' ῥᾶδιον). On this pervasive "misquotation," see John Whittaker, "The Value of Indirect Tradition in the Establishment of Greek Philosophical Texts or the Art of Misquotation," in *Editing Greek and Latin Texts: Papers Given at the Twenty-Third Annual Conference on Editorial Problems at the University of Toronto, 6–7 November 1987* (ed. John N. Grant; New York: AMS Press, 1989) 63–96. Whittaker contends that these "misquotations" are not evidence for the text's instability, but rather, evidence for a shared commentary or doxographical tradition on the *Timaeus*.

of the world and lord of heaven and earth, reads as a subtle affirmation of divine transcendence, a fundamental tenet of Platonism derived (in part) from *Tim.* 28c. These and other similarities led F. E. Brenk to conclude that “the speech of Paul is indeed very close to Platonist thinking.”<sup>31</sup> To be sure, these points of contact are not conclusive evidence that the author drew on *Tim.* 28c. They are, however, at least suggestive of the author’s awareness of this deeply influential saying of Plato.

### ■ Paul’s Areopagus Speech and the Reception of *Timaeus* 28c

Elements of Paul’s Areopagus speech are reminiscent of Plato’s famous dictum concerning the maker and father of the world. Further suggestive of a link between Paul’s speech and *Tim.* 28c are the numerous extant exegetical traditions surrounding the well-known Platonic text.

#### *A. Timaeus 28c and God’s Roles as Maker and Father in Plutarch, Philo, and Acts 17*

Interpreters of Paul’s Areopagus speech have spilled much ink over verse 28: “For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28). It is virtually undisputed that 28b quotes the ancient poet Aratus, while debate over the background for 28a continues.<sup>32</sup> This verse more than any other in the Areopagus address has led commentators to associate the theology of the speech with that of Stoicism. The Stoics certainly embraced an immanent god, and the poet Aratus is known to have had Stoicizing tendencies.<sup>33</sup>

But in the rush to identify the sources behind verse 28, modern commentators are usually quick to sideline the preceding verse, where (as noted above) Paul seems to highlight god’s transcendence. For many commentators, Paul quickly dismisses his transcendent god in favor of the immanent theology of the Stoics. Also unclear is the relationship the author envisions between the tricolon “live . . . move . . . exist” and Aratus’s assertion that humanity is god’s offspring. Hans Conzelmann asserts that the author does not know how to interpret the tricolon correctly and that the quotation of Aratus must thus clumsily serve as both proof and explanation for the

<sup>31</sup> Brenk, “Plutarch, Judaism, and Christianity,” 107.

<sup>32</sup> It has been suggested that 28b might be indebted instead to Cleanthes’s *Hymn to Zeus*, but this is unlikely. The relevant portion of Cleanthes’s hymn is not as similar to 17:28b in Greek as it sometimes sounds in English translation: ἐκ σοῦ γὰρ γενόμεσθα. The hymn uses a second person address and, more importantly, employs a different verb (see Mark Edwards, “Quoting Aratus: Acts 17,28,” *ZNW* 83 [1992] 266–69, at 266). On the possible attribution of 28a to Epimenides, see the discussion in Rothschild, *Paul in Athens*, 67–73. H. Hommel influentially argued that it is traceable to the *Timaeus* (“Platonisches bei Lucas: Zu Acta 17.28a,” *ZNW* 48 [1957] 193–200). See also Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, 144.

<sup>33</sup> On the tricolon of “live . . . move . . . exist,” see Barrett, *Acts: A Shorter Commentary*, 271; Dibelius, “Paul on the Areopagus,” 48. On problems surrounding Aratus’s alleged Stoicism, see the discussion in Rothschild, *Paul in Athens*, 18–20.

preceding line.<sup>34</sup> Read together, verses 27 and 28 of the speech present something of a puzzle.

A useful comparandum for the theological tension in these verses can be found in some of the interpretations of *Tim. 28c* current in the first and early second centuries CE. Plutarch devotes the second of his *Platonicae Quaestiones* to a careful exegesis of *Tim. 28c*. He begins by asking why Plato in *Tim. 28c* names god “maker and father of all.”<sup>35</sup> In his answer, Plutarch asserts an essential difference in meaning between the titles “maker” and “father”:<sup>36</sup>

Or is there a difference between father and maker and between birth and coming to be? For as what has been born has come to be but not the other way around, so it is that he who has begotten has made, for birth is the coming to be of an animate thing. Also in the case of a maker, such as a builder is or a weaver or one who produces a lyre or a statue, his work when done is separated from him, whereas the principle or force emanating from the parent is blended in the progeny and cohabits its nature, which is a fragment or part of the procreator.<sup>37</sup>

A maker, according to Plutarch, is separated from his work, but in the unique relationship of parent and child, the nature of the father permeates his offspring. For Plutarch, the creating god is the maker of the physical elements of the world but the father of the rational soul:

There are two constituent parts of the universe, body and soul. The former god did not beget (οὐκ ἐγέννησε); but, matter having submitted itself to him, he formed and fitted it together by binding and bounding the unlimited with suitable limits and shapes. The soul, however, when it has partaken of intelligence and reason and concord is not only a work but also a part of god, and has come to be not by him but also from him as source and out of his substance.<sup>38</sup>

John Whittaker offers a helpful summary: “according to Plutarch, god is both transcendent and immanent—both outside the world and within the world. He is transcendent in that he is the highest good, and yet immanent in that the rational soul is not merely his offspring but literally a part of himself.”<sup>39</sup> This is more than an assertion of the kinship (συγγένεια) between god and humanity, a common

<sup>34</sup> Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, 145.

<sup>35</sup> Modern readers generally take Plato’s two-part designation as a kind of metaphorical redundancy, where maker and father mean the same thing; Plutarch himself considers this position, but cursorily dismisses it. See Whittaker, “Plutarch, Platonism, and Christianity,” 51–53.

<sup>36</sup> Numenius (according to Proclus) claimed the two terms referred to two different gods, thus dividing the demiurge of the *Timaeus* in two. Plutarch affirms the unity of the demiurge. See Proclus, in *Tim.* 304.1–5.

<sup>37</sup> Plutarch, *Quaest. plat.* 1001A (translation from Plutarch, *Moralia, Volume 13, Part 1: Platonic Essays* [trans. Harold Cherniss; LCL 427; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976] 1–130).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1001C (LCL 427).

<sup>39</sup> Whittaker, “Plutarch, Platonism, and Christianity,” 52.



τόπος among philosophers and rhetoricians.<sup>40</sup> Whittaker astutely observes that, for Plutarch, being god's offspring entails existing *within* the divine itself. Plutarch's exegesis of *Tim.* 28c subtly resolves the tension between Plato's transcendent theology and the immanent theology of the Stoics. The key for Plutarch is the divine's role as the father of rational souls. Because souls come to be "from him as a source and out of his substance," they owe their existence to him in a unique way, and he is thus appropriately referred to as their father.<sup>41</sup>

Plutarch elsewhere makes use of the same Platonic phrase from *Tim.* 28c to make a similar point about god's fatherhood:

I am reassured when I hear Plato himself naming the uncreated and eternal god as the father and maker of the cosmos and of other created things. They were created not through semen, surely; it was by a different potency that God begot in matter the principle of generation, under whose influence it became receptive and was transformed. . . . And I do not find it strange if it is not by a physical approach, like a man's, but by some other kind of contact or touch, by other agencies, that a god alters mortal nature and makes it pregnant with a more divine offspring.<sup>42</sup>

Once again, Plutarch's attention to the two identities assigned to god in *Tim.* 28c leads him to conclude that god's fatherhood is uniquely tied to a specific mode of generation that imparts a share of divinity to the begotten. Importantly, Plutarch emphasizes that god's relationship to his offspring is not a physical one, a point of disagreement with some of the "grosser forms of Stoic materialism," as Whittaker put it.<sup>43</sup>

Plutarch was not the first to find two distinct divine roles in *Tim.* 28c. David Runia, commenting on Philo's use of the famous Platonic phrase, observes that "the distinction between the technological and the biological metaphor, which provides the main interpretative thrust in Plutarch's solution, is clearly recognized by Philo."<sup>44</sup> Whether or not the term "metaphor" is appropriate to these ancient interpretations of Plato, Runia has helpfully identified in Philo a similar distinction between god's role as maker and father in texts like *De opificio mundi* and *De aeternitate mundi*:

<sup>40</sup> See, famously, Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 12.61. Dio's twelfth (or "Olympic") oration is often cited in comparison with Paul's Areopagus speech (e.g., Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, 523; Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 583). Ironically, it is little noted that the entire conceit of Dio's oration runs counter to the aim of the Areopagus speech, for the twelfth oration is ultimately a philosophically tinged rhetorical defense of the worship of the famous statue of Zeus Olympios. Interestingly, a similar connection between humanity's *συγγένεια* with the divine and the appropriateness of altar/image worship is asserted in Plato, *Prot.* 322a.

<sup>41</sup> This interpretive decision is taken up by the Neoplatonist Proclus in the 5th cent. Proclus affirms that the Platonic phrase refers to one god (*in Tim.* 304.14–22) and that the titles refer to distinct phases in creation: "maker" as concerns matter, "father" as concerns ensouled things (*in Tim.* 300.2–14).

<sup>42</sup> Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 718A (LCL 425:117).

<sup>43</sup> Whittaker, "Plutarch, Platonism, and Christianity," 50.

<sup>44</sup> Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato*, 109 (italics original).

For it stands to reason that what has been brought into existence should be cared for by its Father and Maker. For, as we know, it is a father's aim in regard of his offspring (ἐκγόνων) and an artificer's in regard of his handiwork (τῶν δημιουργηθέντων) to preserve them.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the whole treatise [that is, the *Timaeus*] he speaks of the great Framer of deities as the Father and Maker and Artificer and this world as His work (ἔργον) and offspring (ἔγγονον), a sensible copy of the archetypal and intelligible model.<sup>46</sup>

In each of these texts, the latter of which refers to the *Timaeus* specifically, Philo demonstrates a sensitivity to the distinctions between the title of maker, which he links with inanimate “work” (ἔργον/τῶν δημιουργηθέντων), and the title of father, which he links with offspring (ἔγγονον). Philo does not clearly specify that god's role as maker pertains to the world's physical elements and his role as father to the soul as Plutarch does. However, he is an early and important witness to this trend in Middle Platonic interpretations of *Tim.* 28c. For both Plutarch and Philo, Plato's assertion that god is both maker and father communicates two distinct theological statements.

If we look carefully, we can observe the same logic in Paul's speech. Paul affirms a transcendent god who is maker of the cosmos up through verse 27, a fact that often gets overlooked in interpretations of verse 28. But for Paul, the immanence of god can still be affirmed because, as even Aratus observed, humanity is god's offspring. Like Plutarch, Paul seems to envision a closer relationship between the divine and his offspring (γένος) than normally went along with appeals to humanity's kinship (συγγένεια) with the gods.<sup>47</sup> In the logic of the speech, the fact that humanity is god's offspring uniquely explains the phenomenon Paul has just mentioned: that despite god's transcendence, humanity exists within the divine nature itself. The quotation of Aratus, contra many commentators, is no clumsy misinterpretation of the foregoing statement. Rather, it sounds like a good Middle Platonic explanation of god's immanence based on *Tim.* 28c. God can remain separated from the world as maker, but closely bound up in humanity as father.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Philo, *Opif.* 10 (Philo, *On the Creation* [trans. F. H. Colson; LCL 226; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929] 11).

<sup>46</sup> Philo, *Aet.* 15 (Philo, *On the Eternity of the World* [trans. F. H. Colson; LCL 363; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941] 195).

<sup>47</sup> See n. 36 above. The συγγένεια of humanity and god was usually asserted to justify humanity's worship of the gods with images (e.g., Dio *Or.* 12. 61; Plato, *Prot.* 322a). This is out of step with Paul's polemic against image worship in the Areopagus address, furthering the likelihood that here “offspring” is a more specific invocation of god's fatherhood.

<sup>48</sup> Though the point is perhaps too obvious to bear repeating, there is something of a difference between affirming that god dwells in everything (the view of the Stoics) and affirming that humanity lives in god. It is not insignificant that no proper parallel to the phrase ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ ζῶμεν καὶ κινούμεθα καὶ ἐσμέν can be adduced from the philosophical literature. Probably the closest is the Neoplatonist Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.5.1.25: ἀλλ' ἐσμέν ἐν αὐτῷ, where the pronoun refers to the neuter principle “being” (τὸ ὄν). See Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech*, 183–84. Text from Plotinus, *Ennead: Volume 6* (trans. A. H. Armstrong; LCL 440; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969) 329.

That this separation of world and creator is largely out of step with the Stoicism current in the first century is rarely noted by those who maintain that the Areopagus speech reflects a Stoic background. For the Stoic in Cicero's *De natura deorum*, it is the world itself that is the ultimate source of life: "the sower and planter and begetter, so to speak, of all the things that nature governs, their trainer and nourisher, is the world . . . [but some] however raise doubts about the world itself from which all things arise and have their being" (*Nat. d.* 2.34–35). "There is no need to uplift your hands to heaven," Seneca advises Lucilius, for "god is near you, he is with you, he is within you."<sup>49</sup> God's immanence for the Stoics was assured by their pantheistic identifications between god, world, and humanity. As David Sedley has noted, the non-immanence of god in the *Timaeus* is one of the primary elements distinguishing Platonic theology from Stoic theology.<sup>50</sup>

For later interpreters of Plato, this tension could be resolved by appealing specifically to *Tim.* 28c. God's transcendence and his nearness were on display in Plato's double designation of maker and father. By examining the reception history of this famous phrase from Plato, we might be one step closer to understanding Paul's abrupt switch from transcendence to immanence in Acts 17:27–28. If we permit ourselves to search for philosophical antecedents to the speech's theology, we cannot ignore the similarities between verses 27–28 and these Middle Platonic receptions of *Tim.* 28c.

### *B. Timaeus 28c and Special Revelation in Philo, Justin, and Acts 17*

Paul's Areopagus speech finds the apostle declaring a god who is maker of the world and father of humanity, a theologically significant distinction of god's roles that has strong parallels in the exegetical traditions surrounding *Tim.* 28c. There is yet another element of Paul's speech that helps situate the address among interpreters of Plato's *Timaeus*. Paul promises to declare to the Athenian philosophers an "unknown god" (ἄγνωστος θεός). This declaration, inspired by an altar dedicated to the unknown god, has long served as a locus classicus for natural theology, where Paul is interpreted as praising the Athenians' long-standing worship of the same god he preaches. But as Kavin Rowe has incisively observed, the force of Paul's declaration has the opposite effect. It is the Athenians' ignorance of god that is in view in Paul's speech. Their need to have the unknown god declared to them is "self-testimony to their need for the kind of knowledge that comes with Paul's preaching."<sup>51</sup>

In laying claim to a unique relationship with the unknown god, Paul participates in a key feature of many other engagements with *Tim.* 28c from antiquity. One of the earliest extant examples comes from Philo's *De Abrahamo* 57, where Philo

<sup>49</sup> Seneca, *Ep.* 41.1 (Seneca, *Epistles: Volume I* [trans. Richard M. Gummere; LCL 75; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917] 273).

<sup>50</sup> Sedley, "The Origins of Stoic God," 63.

<sup>51</sup> Rowe, "The Grammar of Life," 41.

comments en passant on the nation of Israel's descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob:

[Israel's] high position is shown by the name; for the nation is called in the Hebrew tongue Israel, which, being interpreted, is "He who sees God." Now the sight of the eyes is the most excellent of all the senses, since by it alone we apprehend the most excellent of existing things, the sun and the moon and the whole heaven and world; but the sight of the mind, the dominant element in the soul, surpasses all the other faculties of the mind, and this is wisdom which is the sight of the understanding. But he to whom it is given . . . to see the *Father and Maker of all*, may rest assured that he is advanced to the crowning point of happiness; for nothing is higher than God.<sup>52</sup>

Philo employs an allusion to Plato's famous saying in *Tim.* 28c to extol the blessedness of the one who has seen god. Just lines above, Philo had made it clear who he has in mind. With an etymological argument that ties the meaning of "Israel" to the experience of seeing god, Philo elevates the nation's unique status as recipients of divine revelation.<sup>53</sup> That the distinctively Platonic epithet for god is used probably signals Philo's awareness of its fuller context. Plato declared that the maker and father of the world was hard to find; Philo agrees, and subtly positions Israel as the revelation-bearer of whose existence Plato was skeptical.

We can observe the same phenomenon in Justin's *Second Apology*. Justin, in an attempt to validate the Christian faith, links the careers of both Socrates and Jesus together in very familiar terms:

But Socrates . . . throwing Homer and the other poets out of the city, taught men to shun wicked demons and those who did what the poets said, and urged them to knowledge, through rational inquiry, of the god unknown (πρὸς θεοῦ δὲ τοῦ ἀγνώστου) to them, saying "*the father and maker of all is not easy to find nor is it safe for one who has found him to declare him to all.*" These things our Christ did through his own power. (*2 Apol.* 10.5–7)<sup>54</sup>

Justin finds in Socrates and Christ two individuals who can each be said to have declared the unknown god, the god who, though not easy to find, is the father and maker of all. Justin makes his claim partially through a citation of *Tim.* 28c.<sup>55</sup> We

<sup>52</sup> Philo, *Abr.* 57 (Philo, *On Abraham* [trans. F. H. Colson; LCL 289; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935] 33; italics added).

<sup>53</sup> See Ellen Birnbaum, "What Does Philo Mean by 'Seeing God'?" in *Society of Biblical Literature: 1995 Seminar Papers* (ed. Eugene H. Lovering Jr; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1995) 535–52, at 539.

<sup>54</sup> Translation adapted from *Justin Martyr, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (ed. with commentary by Denis Minns and Paul Parvis; OECT; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 312–13 (italics added).

<sup>55</sup> There are tantalizing similarities between Justin's statement and the Areopagus speech itself, especially given Justin's mention of the unknown god. However, it is by no means certain that Justin knew Acts, or even if Acts can be reliably dated to the period before Justin. Despite some similarities, I believe this passage from Justin suggests his ignorance of Acts, for Justin asserts that it was not Paul but Socrates and Christ who declared the unknown god. For a review of the issues,

find in Justin another example of *Tim. 28c* being employed in a context where the issue in view is special knowledge of the divine. Between Philo and Justin we can start to sketch the outline of a shared Jewish/Christian apologetic tactic: invoking *Tim. 28c* to answer Plato's philosophical challenge. Finding the maker and father of all might not be easy, but Philo and Justin believe that their access to revelation has made it possible.

Many of the same features are on display in the Areopagus address. Paul chides the ignorance of his philosophical interlocutors and offers to tell them about the unknown god, whose presence and power the Paul of Acts has seen quite personally.<sup>56</sup> If we are correct in seeing connections to *Tim. 28c* in the speech's distinctions between god's roles as transcendent maker and immanent father, then Paul's claim to be the one who proclaims him might be evidence that the author of Acts participates in the same apologetic maneuver we find in Philo and Justin. This, combined with the similarities we observed between the speech and Plutarch's exegesis, offers an intriguing rereading of Paul's Areopagus address, one where Paul sounds a good deal like a contemporary interpreter of the *Timaieus*.

### ■ Theological Debate and Paul's Characterization in Acts 17:16–34

If there are elements of Paul's Areopagus speech that cohere quite closely with Middle Platonic interpretations of *Tim. 28c*, what implications does this have for our reading of the narrative? Brenk attributed the speech's congruity with Middle Platonism to a late date for both Acts and Middle Platonism:

Could the chronological gap between the actual speech in Athens and the spread of Middle Platonism be reflected on the one hand in Paul's apparent obliviousness of the Platonists in a scene in which only Stoics and Epicureans appear, and on the other in the tone of the speech reported by "Luke" which seems so redolent of Middle Platonism?<sup>57</sup>

In Brenk's solution, the author of Acts is apparently influenced by Middle Platonism but, in an attempt to be historically sensitive, does not mention the Platonists among the philosophers in 17:18. This is somewhat puzzling, for it is no anachronism to speak of (Middle) Platonism in the latter half of the first century CE.<sup>58</sup> But even if the Middle Platonism on display in the speech were not current at the time of Paul's historical visit to Athens, we are nonetheless justified in investigating how it functions in the narrative into which it has been inserted.

see Andrew Gregory, *The Reception of Luke and Acts in the Period Before Irenaeus: Looking for Luke in the Second Century* (WUNT 2/169; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 317–21. See also Rowe, "The Grammar of Life," 32.

<sup>56</sup> See Acts 9:1–9; 22:5–11.

<sup>57</sup> Brenk, "Plutarch, Judaism, and Christianity," 106.

<sup>58</sup> Eudorus of Alexandria is one well-known representative of the early Middle Platonic movement in the 1st cent. BCE, and some form of Middle Platonism had already had a strong influence on Philo in the first half of the 1st cent. CE.

Brenk helpfully focuses our attention on the absence of Platonists in 17:18, where the author paints Stoics and Epicureans as Paul's primary interlocutors. The mention of these two groups specifically has been treated in a variety of ways. In 1974, C. K. Barrett lamented the inattention given to the function of these specific schools within the narrative: "Why are these two schools mentioned? Many commentaries simply pass this question by, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that only Epicureans and Stoics should be mentioned, and as if Pythagoreans, Cynics, Peripatetics, Sceptics, and the rest did not exist."<sup>59</sup> We might add "the Platonists" to Barrett's list.<sup>60</sup>

Barrett's own solution suggests that the Epicureans and Stoics are invoked because the speech alludes to elements of each school's philosophy, especially the Stoics. Barrett's view relies on the influential work of Max Pohlenz, whose argument that the speech is fundamentally Stoic has shaped nearly all interpretations since its publication.<sup>61</sup> The unfortunate truth is that the speech's Stoic qualities are often asserted but rarely argued convincingly. Several studies over the last few decades have drawn attention to the speech's tenuous relationship to first-century Stoicism. Conzelmann cautions interpreters against over-identifying Paul's speech with Stoicism, noting "the absence of precisely the specific elements of Stoic philosophy," citing the fact that key Stoic terms like *λόγος*, *πνεῦμα*, and *φύσις* fail to appear in the speech.<sup>62</sup> Balch's reading of the speech casts Paul as the Stoic historian Posidonius "making a . . . critical evaluation of contemporary Stoics over against their older, wiser teacher."<sup>63</sup> Further, as we have noted above, much of the speech's explicitly theological content, regarding the transcendence of the divine, the separation of the creating god from the world, and humanity's experience of god's immanence through his role as father, is more characteristic of the theology of Middle Platonism than of first-century Stoicism.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup> C. K. Barrett, "Paul's Speech on the Areopagus," in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World: Essays in Honor of Harry Sawyerr* (ed. Mark E. Glasswell and Edward W. Fasholé-Luke; London: SPCK, 1974) 69–77, at 72.

<sup>60</sup> In response to the claim that the Stoics and Epicureans were chosen as the most popular schools of philosophy of the day, Barrett wryly (and correctly) notes that "Zeno and Epicurus were not the only, or indeed the greatest philosophers who had worked in Athens" (Barrett, "Paul's Speech," 72).

<sup>61</sup> Max Pohlenz, "Paulus und die Stoa," *ZNW* 42 (1949) 69–104.

<sup>62</sup> Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, 148.

<sup>63</sup> Balch, "The Areopagus Speech," 74. Balch's argument that Paul is portrayed as Posidonius relies on Posidonius's invective against worshipping god as if he had form. As we shall see below, a much closer analogue on that subject is the Middle Platonist Plutarch's critique of Stoic idol worship in *Stoic. rep.* 1034B–C.

<sup>64</sup> These distinctions between Paul's theology and Stoic theology are frequently noted by studies that nonetheless maintain that the philosophical elements embedded in the speech are Stoic (e.g., Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 584). Few have recognized that the Platonic tradition offers a more compelling parallel to the speech's theology. Perhaps the most overweighed piece of evidence in the argument for the speech's Stoicism is the citation of Aratus in v. 28, who is usually said to have been a Stoic poet. Rothschild's recent study of the Areopagus speech has drawn attention to the classicist Douglas Kidd's significant work on Aratus, where he argues that the portion of the

The philosophical allusions in the Areopagus speech demand new attention once we lay aside the thesis that the speech is Stoic. If the speech is so “redolent of Middle Platonism” as Brenk put it and as I argue above, why are only Stoics and Epicureans mentioned, as in verse 18?<sup>65</sup> I suggest it is because the author has crafted a narrative where Paul is meant to be read as a representative of the Platonic tradition in dialogue with the two other major philosophical schools.

It has become common to recognize that the narrative of Acts 17 includes many features that are reminiscent of the genre of philosophical dialogue. Two well-known philosophical schools are mentioned and are portrayed as disputing (συνέβαλλον) with Paul, where συμβάλλω evokes the type of interlocution favored by Socrates (see Plato’s *Crat.* 384a).<sup>66</sup> That Paul’s message is not consistent with the philosophers’ own doctrine is assumed in verses 19–21, when they invite him to offer a more thoroughgoing defense of his proclamation. The context, then, is one of a philosophical dialogue between Stoics, Epicureans, and the third perspective represented by Paul, which we have seen to resonate with Middle Platonism.<sup>67</sup>

If the scene *is* meant to evoke the setting of a philosophical dialogue, the introduction of Stoics and Epicureans furthers our suggestion that Paul is being aligned with some form of the Platonic tradition. Indeed, Stoics, Epicureans, and Platonists were frequently associated together within the context of theological debate, whether historical or literary fictions. Perhaps the most famous example comes again from Cicero’s *De natura deorum*. Cicero describes himself entering a party where his friends Gaius Cotta (Cicero’s fellow Academic), Gaius Velleius (an Epicurean), and Quintus Lucilius Balbus (a Stoic) are discussing theology.<sup>68</sup>

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*Phaenomena* quoted in Acts 17:28 actually represents an instance where Aratus avoids or represses Stoic theology (Rothschild, *Paul in Athens*, 19). While Rothschild’s larger argument that Paul is portrayed as the mythical poet Epimenides does not quite persuade, she has done the academy an important service in helping to chip away at the popular assumption that the speech is Stoic). Indeed, Aratus was a commonly cited poet in theological debates of the first few centuries. As is well known, the Jewish philosopher Aristobulus had already made use of Aratus’s *Phaenomena* in his own defense of the Jewish religion. Aratus also plays a key role in the theological dialogue of Cicero’s *De natura deorum*, where he is quoted with approval by both the Stoic and the Platonist philosophers (see *Nat. d.* 2.51). It has been suggested several times that the author’s knowledge of Aratus comes through Aristobulus, though the popularity of the poet does not preclude the author’s direct knowledge of him, especially if we grant, with Edwards, that the author received a Greek education (Edwards, “Quoting Aratus,” 268). Citing Aratus, in other words, by no means a Stoic makes, especially given the rather polemical introduction “as some of your own poets have said” (compare Titus 1:12).

<sup>65</sup> See Brenk, “Plutarch, Judaism, and Christianity,” 106.

<sup>66</sup> Jipp, “Paul’s Areopagus Speech,” 571.

<sup>67</sup> Jipp asserts that the author does not set up the dialogue “for the purpose of narrating a philosophical conversation between Hellenistic philosophical schools,” but the evidence points in the other direction (Jipp, “Paul’s Areopagus Speech,” 571).

<sup>68</sup> The so-called New Academy represented in Cicero’s dialogue is typically portrayed as distinct from “Middle Platonism” on account of its alleged skepticism. But it is increasingly recognized that Cicero occupied a kind of transitional state between these two phases of the Platonic tradition, especially given his admiration for the Platonic-dogmatist Antiochus. See Carlos Lévy, “Cicero

Cicero is invited to engage in their debate, and he comments: “I think I have come at the right time . . . for here are you, three leaders of three schools of philosophy, met in congress. In fact we only want Marcus Piso to have every considerable school represented.”<sup>69</sup>

The Marcus Piso to whom Cicero refers would supply a representative of the Peripatetic school, but his absence is quickly explained by Cotta: “you have no need to regret the absence of your friend Piso. Antiochus holds the view that the doctrines of the Stoics, though differing in form of expression, agree in substance with those of the Peripatetics.”<sup>70</sup> An Aristotelian is not needed because, at least according to the Platonist Antiochus, the Stoics and the Peripatetics hold much the same views on the divine.

Cicero’s introduction reveals an important assumption regarding the significant relationship between the Stoics, Epicureans, and Platonists in theological dialogue. Where Stoics and Epicureans are gathered to converse, Cicero assumes that a Platonist should be present to round out the discussion.<sup>71</sup> This is a consistent motif in many of Cicero’s dialogues, where the views of an Epicurean and a Stoic are considered in turn, before the final presentation (and vindication) of the Academic/Platonic philosophy embraced by Cicero and (often) his teacher Antiochus.<sup>72</sup> If Cicero can be taken as representative of the genre of philosophical dialogue in the Roman period, it might not be too much of a stretch to imagine the author of Acts picking up on the same assumption. The mention of Stoics and Epicureans clues in the philosophically informed reader to anticipate a Platonic perspective.

And indeed, to a certain point, the speech reads quite nicely as a Middle Platonic criticism of the two other schools. We have already seen above how much the theology of the Areopagus speech is out of step with first-century Stoicism. This pattern holds true for another key issue in Paul’s address: idol worship. Paul asserts to the Stoics and the Epicureans that god “does not live in temples built by hands, nor is he served by human hands as if he needed anything” (Acts 17:24–25). One of the texts most frequently cited in comparison with these verses comes from Plutarch’s *De Stoicorum repugnantiis*, where Plutarch cites Zeno’s disdain for idols and temples as a critique of the Stoics of his day:

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and the New Academy,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (ed. Lloyd P. Gerson; 2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 1:39–61, at 1:41.

<sup>69</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 1.16 (LCL 268:19).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> And perhaps an Aristotelian, too, if one does not (with Antiochus) assume that the Stoics and the Peripatetics hold much the same view. This is denied by Balbus (2.7). A similar sentiment might be evident in Galen, who speaks of holding philosophical debates where the Platonists, Epicureans, and “Stoics and Peripatetics” are listed first among other philosophers, though other schools are represented (Galen, *Aff. Pecc. Dig.* 2.5). Here and elsewhere, Galen closely associates the Stoics and Peripatetics (compare *Foet. Form.* 4).

<sup>72</sup> The clearest example of this (after *De natura deorum*) is Cicero’s *De finibus*.



Moreover, it is a doctrine of Zeno's not to build temples of the gods, because a temple not worth much is also not sacred and no work of builders or mechanics is worth much. The Stoics, while applauding this as correct, attend the mysteries in temples, go up to the Acropolis, do reverence to statues, and place wreaths upon the shrines, though these are works of builders and mechanics. Yet they think that the Epicureans are confuted by the fact that they sacrifice to the gods, whereas they are themselves worse confuted by sacrificing at altars and temples which they hold do not exist and should not be built.<sup>73</sup>

While this is very frequently adduced as evidence for Stoic disapproval of idol worship, most commentators ironically ignore its context and thus its real value for illuminating the Areopagus speech.<sup>74</sup> Even if it attests Zeno's rejection of temple worship in the fourth century BCE, the text as a whole functions as a critique of Stoics from a Middle Platonist making use of a reputable Stoic source.<sup>75</sup> This is similar to what we find in the Areopagus speech, where Paul tacitly accuses his philosophical interlocutors of participating in temple worship. A similar critique of the Epicureans is made by the Academic Cotta in Cicero's dialogue: "I am personally acquainted with Epicureans who worship every paltry image" (*Nat. d.* I.30). The fact that this oft-quoted text is really a Middle Platonic polemic against the temple worship practiced by both Stoics and Epicureans has not been given due weight. That Middle Platonism (via Plutarch), Stoicism, and Epicureanism are the three groups in view here also offers further evidence for the kind of "triangulation" that often occurred between these three schools in theological debate, the same phenomenon we observed in Cicero.

The point is not that criticisms of temple-worship were unique to Platonists in the Roman period—this claim would be untenable. But in conjunction with the Areopagus speech's similarities to Plutarch's exegesis of *Tim.* 28c, this Middle Platonic critique of both Stoics and Epicureans does strengthen the plausibility of a connection between the Areopagus speech and our Middle Platonic sources. Indeed, as we saw in passing above, the Stoic Seneca's criticism of temple use in *Epistle* 41 (another oft-cited text in studies of Acts 17) rested explicitly on god's immanence. But god's immanence does not seem to ground the author of Acts' distaste for temple worship. This is made clear by another famous moment in Acts where god is said to not live in temples "built by hands." This is at the trial of Stephen, where Stephen critiques the temple system by citing Isaiah's assertion that heaven is god's throne and the earth his footstool (Acts 7:49–50). The same

<sup>73</sup> Plutarch, *Stoic. rep.* 1034B–C (Plutarch, *Moralia, Volume 13: Part 2* (trans. Harold Cherniss; LCL 470; Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976) 423.

<sup>74</sup> E.g., Balch, "The Areopagus Speech," 68; Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 577; Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, 141.

<sup>75</sup> We might note that this is another reason not to read too much into Paul's citation of the "Stoic" Aratus; refuting one's philosophical opponent by citing an ancient representative of their school was a useful polemical tactic. See Mikeal Parsons, *Acts* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 247–48.

idea is probably in view in Paul's assertion that god is lord of heaven and earth in 17:24.<sup>76</sup> The pantheist Seneca warned Lucilius against the folly of seeking god in heaven because the divine permeates the created order (*Ep.* 41), but Paul affirms the opposite. Though he will go on to demonstrate humanity's close connection to god through his role as father, here Paul uses god's total separation from the world to criticize temple worship, lending another specifically Platonic ring to Paul's charge against his Stoic and Epicurean opponents.<sup>77</sup>

## ■ Conclusion

Some qualifications are necessary. As has long been recognized, elements of Paul's speech, particularly the final judgment and resurrection, do not conform to any of the philosophical schools.<sup>78</sup> Gärtner's 1955 monograph helpfully details the extent to which the speech can be read as a piece of Hellenistic Jewish polemic against Greek religiosity. Rowe's reading of the speech reminds us that even if philosophical details are borrowed from the Greeks, the "grammar" of the speech remains distinctively Christian (to whatever extent that term can be appropriately used for the middle of the first century).<sup>79</sup> More recently, Jipp has synthesized these observations and concluded that the speech is a both/and rather than an either/or. In Jipp's words, Paul's address has "a two-fold agenda: to narrate the complete incongruity between the Christian movement and Gentile religion . . . and to exalt the Christian movement as comprising the best features of Greco-Roman philosophical sensibilities."<sup>80</sup>

Jipp's reading has much to commend it, but it overemphasizes the speech's compatibility with Greek philosophy more generally. My reading adds the clarification that for the author of Acts, the "best features of Greco-Roman philosophical sensibilities" are found in the Platonic tradition.<sup>81</sup> The author finds in the *Timaeus* and its interpreters the closest philosophical counterparts to the beliefs of the early Christ-followers, and Paul's speech reflects this. In a narrative context where an informed reader might expect a Platonist, the Jewish gospel preacher proclaims to them the world-making god, transcendent and hard to find, yet near to humanity through his role as their father. He lays claim to the title of philosopher

<sup>76</sup> Noted also by Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 579 n. 53.

<sup>77</sup> Two helpful Middle Platonic analogues can be found in the discussion of divine transcendence in Alcinoüs, *Didaskalikos* 10, as well as Philo's assertion in *Somn.* 1:215 that god's true temple is ὁ κόσμος.

<sup>78</sup> Brenk's attempt to link the resurrection of the Areopagus speech with the Middle Platonic notion of the soul's ascent to god is far-fetched (Brenk, "Plutarch, Judaism, and Christianity," 107).

<sup>79</sup> Rowe, "The Grammar of Life," 31–50. Rowe's exegesis is sharp, though I believe he undervalues the fruitfulness of comparing traditions and overemphasizes their incompatibility.

<sup>80</sup> Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 568.

<sup>81</sup> This article's contribution strengthens the connections between the speech and Platonism observed by others (see n. 7 above) by situating the author among interpreters of Plato in the 1st and 2nd centuries.

par excellence by declaring the heretofore unknown god by virtue of his unique access to revelation, criticizing Stoics and Epicureans for their hypocritical idol worship. In casting Paul as the Platonist in this theological dialogue, the author legitimates the Christian message by aligning it with an esteemed philosophical tradition. Depending on when one dates Acts, the speech might represent one of the earliest Christian attempts to baptize Plato (and especially the *Timaeus*) into the Christian tradition.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Paul's only convert among the Areopagus, Dionysius, would become the pseudonym for the most famous Christian Neoplatonist in the tradition, Pseudo-Dionysius. Does this choice of pseudonym reflect the Neoplatonist's recognition of the Areopagus speech's Platonic resonances?