# The Areopagus Speech and Contextualization: Some Hermeneutical and Exegetical Considerations

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## Abstract

The Areopagus speech is commonly seen as a model of missionary contextualization, an exemplary translation of the gospel into the language and concepts of Paul's Athenian audience. This article evaluates this line of interpretation using the hermeneutical concept of "framing" that is at the heart of contemporary linguistics, narratology, translation theory, and evangelical contextualization models. Looking especially at the work of Colin Chapman and Kevin Higgins, two influential missiologists, and considering seven key exegetical cruxes, it shows that their type of interpretation fails to read the speech contextually because it is not attentive to the way Paul and Luke frame the text.



## Keywords

*Areopagus speech, contextualization, book of Acts, cognitive linguistics, narratology, missiology, biblical hermeneutics (or biblical interpretation), Colin Chapman, Kevin Higgins*

Paul's Areopagus speech in Acts 17:22–31 is commonly, if not universally, considered the biblical *locus classicus* of cross-cultural (cross-religious) communication and evangelism.[1] It is the only example recorded in the New Testament of an apostolic presentation of the gospel message to a pagan[2] audience, that is, to a group of people completely unfamiliar with the Old Testament Scriptures.[3] As such, it is generally understood to be a model or exemplar provided for the church's witness "to the end of the earth" until the Lord Jesus returns.[4] Since the 1970s, the particular "method" employed by Paul in his address is construed and defined as "contextualization"[5]—so much so that this interpretation crux is typically taken for granted rather than argued or demonstrated, especially by missiologists and practitioners (our focus in this article), and occasionally by biblical scholars too.

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[1] "Paul's address to the Athenians in Acts 17 is perhaps the outstanding example of intercultural evangelistic witness in the New Testament. This makes it a pivotal text for our study of New Testament patterns of contextualization. … In Acts 17, Luke gives us a snapshot of Paul at the height of his powers as a missionary communicator." Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Groves, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 72.

[2] I use the terms "pagan" and "paganism" to refer globally to the highly diverse religious beliefs, practices, and cults encountered all over the ancient Mediterranean world, together with their cultural, social, and political embodiments. Though past scholars have questioned the validity of these terms, there exists a consensus among contemporary historians of antiquity that there were enough common features among these to legitimately use a single label to denote them. Further, these historians agree that they share a basic world and life view—as long as it is understood that they did not constitute a unified religion with a shared creed, organization, or rituals. Cf. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 26–47.

[3] Paul and Barnabas's words in Lystra (Acts 14:14–18) do not constitute a missionary speech but an urgent attempt to prevent the local people from offering a sacrifice to them as if they were gods. It clarifies who they are and their purpose in relation to the true God who alone is the creator and bestower of all goods.

[4] If not a model to be followed today, at least a model of the common apostolic practice. There have been only a few exceptions to this interpretation. William M. Ramsay (*St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897]) is especially famous for claiming based on 1 Corinthians 2:2–5 that the speech is a one-time (failed) attempt by Paul to use a philosophical argument, an approach that he would have subsequently repudiated. No serious interpreter of the speech today finds his argument convincing: the nature and the content of the book of Acts as a whole speak against it.

[5] The term "contextualization" first appeared in a report of the Theology Education Fund in 1972. However, the issue of how to adapt one's gospel proclamation to one's audience is nothing new and was already raised by the earliest church fathers. In the past two centuries, it was mostly discussed under the rubrics of "adaptation," "accommodation," "acculturation," "inculturation," "nativization," or "indigenization." For a short historical survey, see Dean Gilliland, "Contextualization," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland, and Charles Van Engen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 225–26.

## I. *What Is Contextualization?*[6]

Maybe the first challenge we encounter is what the term "contextualization" and its cognates mean. In his dictionary entry on contextualization Dean Gilliland (ironically) states, "There is no single or broadly accepted definition of contextualization."[7] Indeed, the term is notorious for being used to refer to many different concepts in the literature, often without clarification or specification. Most, however, would generally agree with Gilliland that the goal of contextualization

> is to enable, insofar as is humanly possible, an understanding of what it means that Jesus Christ, the Word, is authentically experienced in each and every situation. … The gospel is Good News when it provides answers for a particular people living in a particular place at a particular time. This means the worldview of that people provides a framework for communication, the questions and needs of that people are a guide to the emphasis of the message, and the cultural gifts of that people become the medium of expression.[8]

Differences in approaches are often considered from an essentially *quantitative* point of view, as a continuum between two extremes—under-contextualization and overcontextualization.[9] This tendency has been reinforced and solidified by the "C1-C6 spectrum" (sometimes "C scale") developed by John Travis (a pseudonym). His analytical description has become a dominant framework, shaping and directing the way people in missionary and church-planting circles think and talk about the topic.[10] Such a perspective, however, is reductionistic. What fundamentally distinguishes the different conceptions and practices of contextualization is not so much a matter of *amount* as a matter of *kind*.

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[6] The purpose of this article is not to debate contextualization theory itself—even less to assess the merits or demerits of any particular model—but exclusively to look at certain *hermeneutical* and *exegetical* common practices pursued in its name and support. I therefore limit myself to some general orientating considerations in this section.

[7] As quoted from Gilliland, "Contextualization," 225.

[8] Ibid.

[9] For two random examples from influential figures, see Tim Keller, "Center Church: Gospel Contextualization Q&A," Redeemer City to City, September 16, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9a1VGW99uI&t=758s, and Greg Parsons, "What Is Contextualization?," EplainEDtv, August 11, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGj2v-BHlgQ.

[10] John Travis, "The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of 'Christ-Centered Communities' ('C') Found in the Muslim Context," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34.4 (1998): 407–8. Observe the authoritative role it plays in the argument developed by Joshua Massey, "God's Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17.1 (Spring 2000): 5–14.

Understandably, practical matters such as cross-cultural communication (often inclusive of culturally appropriate forms of worship and behavior) tend to dominate discussions of contextualization (whether "overseas" or "at home").[11] However, it is essential to keep in mind that contextualization is, at a deeper and foundational level, concerned with theological method and biblical hermeneutics since it is concerned with how to be disciples of Christ in a specific locale and time. It is hence an outworking of one's world and life view, and thus it entails a particular understanding of human nature and context (which includes, but is not limited to, culture), of their relationship to the gospel, and, therefore, of the nature of the gospel itself.[12]

Paul Hiebert's classic survey of the history of contextualization in missions identifies three main phases or "Weberian ideal types": *noncontextualization* (which includes a period of "minimal contextualization"), *uncritical contextualization* (which includes "radical contextualization"), and *critical contextualization* (the model he advocates, building on a critical-realist epistemology).[13] Though helpful for the big historical picture, this taxonomy is too general and exposes insufficiently the methodological and philosophical (even ideological) diversity composing each category. Gilliland's seven models ("adaptation," "anthropological," "critical, semiotic," "synthetic," "transcendental," and "translation") and Sam Schlorff's six ("imperial," "direct," "indirect or fulfillment," "dialectical," "dialogical," "translational or dynamic equivalence") provide better heuristic tools and offer complementary perspectives.[14] Among evangelicals, the dominant model of contextualization has been and remains the translational type—especially the "dynamic equivalence" kind championed by Charles Kraft, Eugene Nida, and Hiebert, though some (like the defenders of the so-called Insider Movements) have incorporated "incarnational" or "fulfillment" elements in it.

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[11] See, for example, the various relevant contributions in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), a classic anthology.

[12] See Gilliland, "Contextualization," 226–27, or the longer Sam Schlorff, *Missiological Models in Ministry to Muslims* (Upper Darby, PA: Middle East Resources, 2006).

[13] See the older Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11.3 (July 1987): 104–12, or the more recent Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 17–35.

[14] In Gilliland, "Contextualization," 227, and Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 3–27.

## II. *Contextualization-Focused Evangelical Interpretation*

The literature on the Areopagus speech seems to be without end. For the sake of space, and given the narrow scope of our study, we will take our cues primarily from two representative studies of the Areopagus speech published by influential missiologists Colin Chapman and Kevin Higgins.[15] We will look at seven exegetical cruxes that are decisive for the interpretation of the speech as a whole, especially as regards the issue of Paul's contextualizing the gospel for pagans. Though we discuss them individually (for clarity), one should keep in mind that they are interconnected and form a unified hermeneutical complex.

### 1. *Contextual Interpretation and "Framing"*

"Context" plays a crucial role in our interpretative considerations, of course. Besides the obvious centrality of "context" to "contextualization," it is also universally recognized as the most determinative factor in interpretation of any kind (e.g., literary, social, psychological, cultural, and political), and therefore also in biblical exegesis (as perusing any recent exegetical textbook would show). As a matter of fact, "context" has become the heartbeat of all cognitive sciences, which commonly use the language/metaphor of "frame" and "framing" (or functional equivalents such as "schema" or "script") to conceptualize how humans (and human-made "artificial intelligence") produce, access, and process "meaning." This is particularly the case for linguistics, literary studies, narratology, and translation theory.[16] In fact, "framing" and its related concepts are at the very core of the "dynamic equivalence" theory undergirding the translational contextualization model claimed to be exemplified by Paul's address to the Areopagus.

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[15] Colin Chapman, "Rethinking the Gospel for Muslims," in J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*, Crucial Issues in Witness Among Muslims (Monrovia, CA: MARC Publications, 1989), 106–25; Kevin Higgins, "The Key to Insider Movements: The 'Devoteds' of Acts," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21.4 (Winter 2004): 155–65. I am not thereby claiming that all or most proponents of this contextual reading would agree with every point made by these two authors, especially with their theological and missiological elaborations.

[16] For an introduction to the concept in cognitive linguistics, see Ernst Wendland, "Frames of Reference," in *A Guide to Bible Translation: People, Languages, and Topics*, ed. Philip A. Noss and Charles S. Houser (Maitland, FL: Xulon; Swindon, UK: United Bible Societies, 2019), 454–58, and Deborah Tannen, "What's in a Frame? Surface Evidence for Underlying Expectations," in *New Directions in Discourse Processing*, ed. Roy Freedle (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1979), 137–81.

The following is a helpful basic definition:

> A "frame," generally speaking, may be defined as a psychological construct, or mental model, which furnishes one with a prevailing point of view that manipulates prominence and relevance to influence thinking and, if need be, subsequent judgment as well. A frame is an interrelated set of concepts, including associated cultural attitudes, expectations, values, and assumptions, that forms the hermeneutical background for perceiving and understanding any individual concept within it.[17]

As such, frames enable people to make sense of the world and to represent it to others by providing understandable categories. This "framing" is thus crucial for effective communication and proper interpretation. It is how a speaker/author guides the audience/readership along his discourse or narrative:

> By inviting others (observers, listeners, readers, etc.) to conceptualize a certain topic from a predetermined point of view, a text "framer" not only supplies an initial orienting mental scenario, but frequently s/he is also able to control their cognitive and emotive alignment as well as their positive or negative response to that particular subject or issue.[18]

In the remainder of this article, we evaluate the exegetical decisions made by Chapman and Higgins (and some hermeneutical implications) in relation to how Paul and Luke have framed their language, discourse, and narrative. We aim to assess how contextual their reading of the Areopagus speech is.[19]

## 2. *Seven Exegetical Cruxes*

### i. What the Book of Acts Is or Is Not

One of the first steps in the interpretation of any text is to determine what kind of literature we are dealing with so we know what to expect from it and how we are meant to read it. The two articles we are looking at do not address this issue explicitly. However, their respective ways of dealing with the text reveal their unstated (possibly unconscious) point of view. Both interpret the speech and story as historical events and seek to make sense

[17] Ernst Wendland, "Framing the Frames: A Theoretical Framework for the Cognitive Notion of 'Frames of Reference' in Translation," *Journal of Translation* 6.1 (2010): 2. The page numbers refer to the revised version of this article available at https://sun.academia.edu/EWENDLAND, not the published original.

[18] Wendland, "Framing the Frames," 3.

[19] For the scholarly context in which my study fits, the full hermeneutical framework I defend, and my detailed exegesis of the speech, see my monograph, Flavien Pardigon, *Paul Against the Idols: A Contextual Reading of the Areopagus Speech* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019).

of both in terms of "what (must have) happened." As such, the "author" whose meaning is the object of study is Paul, and the "audience" whose understanding is treated as normative is the group of Athenians who heard the speech as it was delivered. The *book* of Acts is here treated as a mere chronicle, the "objective" recording of bare historical events. Though Higgins mentions *Luke* in the first part of his article—where he looks at the various texts in Acts where the term "devoted" is used—he never considers Luke's role as *author* when it comes to Paul's speech; Chapman does not mention him at all. In fact, the narrative, literary, and textual nature of what we have before us appears to play no role in these authors' interpretation. Even less do Luke's readers or his theological, ecclesiological, and rhetorical purposes in reporting this story the way and in the sequence he does.

This feature is congruent with several issues identified below, since trying to interpret Paul's words as historical artifacts in strict or relative abstraction from their *textual* factuality has massive consequences on the framework ("context") used for their interpretation. First, the "encyclopaedic knowledge" activated by the "frames of reference" is located in a different thought-world, one that is exclusively extratextual (therefore abstract, speculative, foreign, and artificial) rather than the one provided by the author for his readers. Second, one is a lot less likely to pay attention to the cues given by the narrator, to the way he frames his story, so a competent reader (in narratological terms) would make sense of it. In any case, what we have in Acts is not a mere collage of self-standing (acontextual) bits of historical information/tradition, but a carefully, intentionally, and meaningfully crafted historical narrative with theological and pastoral purposes—as Luke indicates in the prologue of his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4). One cannot bypass the Lukan framework in which the speech is embedded and the Lukan language in which it is embodied. This fact does not imply that we have lost Paul's intended meaning in the mists of ancient history. What it means is that we have no direct access to it, only a mediated one: to understand *Paul's* oration at the Areopagus rightly, we have no other choice but to listen carefully to *Luke* telling the tale. Luke's story is the only "immediate context" available to us in God's design.[20]

[20] I do not deny the importance of the historical, cultural, political, social, and religious contexts in which that story was composed and first read/heard. They are all part of the extratextual frames of reference activated by the text. I only highlight their theoretical and partial nature in order to emphasize the hermeneutical necessity and primacy (because concrete and "given") of their intratextual and intertextual companions. The fact of the matter is that we are dealing with a *text*. We simply cannot go back in time and listen to Paul first-hand or put ourselves infallibly in his historical audience's shoes.

### ii. What the Speech Is and Is Not

Similarly, the type of speech one determines the Areopagus address to be—which relates to its purpose, goals, and expected content—will control one's reading strategies and expectations. By definition, contextualization-focused interpretations are based on the premise that it is a type of gospel proclamation, a missionary speech showing Paul's (habitual) approach among pagans.[21] The problem with such a view is that, first, it is assumed rather than argued and, second, it does not fit either the picture developed by Luke or the actual content of the speech as reported.[22]

Luke's extensive narrative frame for the speech effectively sets the reader's expectations in this regard. The picture painted in verses 16–21 indicates that not only much of his audience (at least) had already heard the gospel proclaimed, explained, and argued over a certain length of time, but that this is the very reason why they dragged him before the Areopagus court to explain himself. From the perspective of narrative analysis, whatever else the speech might be, it is definitely a form of *post*-evangelism, a consideration sufficient to explain why there is no express "gospel presentation" included in the speech itself. This, combined with several macronarrative and micronarrative elements—Socratic echoes (including the charges that led to his demise), the legal vocabulary, the forceful ushering of Paul, the context of the highest court in the city, and the Lukan running theme of the gospel being under attack (then vindicated)—point clearly in the direction of an *apologia*, a formal defense speech in a juridical setting. According to verse 33, it was rather successful since he left the court unhindered! Though there is undoubtedly much to be learned from this story about cross-cultural gospel communication, the speech itself is not a straightforward model for contextualized *evangelism*, nor can it be a "translation" of the gospel in Greek categories (since it is not meant to present the gospel as such).

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[21] "Luke presents this as a method Paul used regularly, depending upon his hearers and his context." Higgins, "Key to Insider Movements," 160. A number of commentators (not our two authors) see in it a form of "pre-evangelism," either because that was all Paul intended to do (e.g., Flemming, *Contextualization*, 75; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1990], 379) or because he was interrupted and thus did not get to the gospel part itself (e.g., Darrell L. Bock, Acts, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 558).

[22] Another example of such *a priori* identification concerns the often-associated words of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra (Acts 14:14–18). Many, including Higgins, see the two speeches as essentially identical (one addressed to "uneducated" the other to "educated" pagans). Though the two addresses show some limited parallels, their circumstances and purposes (and content) are fundamentally different. No gospel or pre-gospel was intended or communicated in Lystra at that point.

### iii. Paul's Perspective on His Audience

A good storyteller like Luke always frames a story by providing at the outset the basic perspective needed to understand what follows.[23] Of the many elements used to construct this necessary pre-understanding or "thematic" information (such as, when, where, and why), three are especially significant: setting, characterization (the way "characters" in a story are depicted or framed), and the precipitating event for the episode. In our story, verses 16–17 provide this information by emphasizing the extreme idolatry of the place, highlighting Paul's emotional reaction to that situation, and showing how he acted in consequence. Higgins and Chapman both refer to this segment and see in it a challenge to missionaries to feel the same (compassionate) way about the lost.[24]

But is it what the Greek verb *paroxynō* means? What is the frame of reference associated with Luke's use here? A quick look at a standard New Testament Greek lexicon will show that the word usually denotes being aroused to anger or wrath.[25] A word search in Luke-Acts finds that this is the only time the verb is used, while the cognate noun *paroxysmos* occurs in Acts 15:39, referring to the conflict between Paul and Barnabas that leads to their parting ways. Each is used once more in the New Testament: the noun in Hebrews 10:24, "to *provoke* one another to love and good works"; the verb in 1 Corinthians 13:5, "[love] *is* not *irritable*" (ESV). So far, the harvest is rather meager. However, one should remember that, first, the Old Testament was the earliest church's Scriptures (thus Luke's and his original readers') and, second, that its Greek translation(s) (commonly called "Septuagint" for convenience) is the most significant influence on Luke's thought and language. A word search in the Septuagint reaps two occurrences for the noun and fifty-two for the verb.

Significantly, the most typical usage represented is the depiction of Yahweh's attitude or response toward idolatry (of both Israel and the nations) and covenant-breaking, often in combination with cognates of *thymos*

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[23] Some of those develop with the narrative, occasionally experiencing surprising turns or upsets. However, the initial framing is the necessary point of departure to follow the narrative line (or plot) and keep up with the narrator's point of view.

[24] Chapman speaks of Paul's "distress," while Higgins uses terms like "disturbed," "passionate," "heart," "care," and "moved to act"; see respectively, Chapman, "Rethinking," 107, and Higgins, "The Key to Insider Movements," 161.

[25] The Bauer lexicon also suggests "grief" or "desire to convert" for our text but does not provide any external evidence; see Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 629.

("wrath") or *orgē* ("anger").[26] They occur particularly in the context of anti-idol polemics like those found in Isaiah and Jeremiah, which constitute the intertextual warp of the entire Areopagus speech! Luke is using the verb *paroxynō* to activate this frame of reference in his readers' mind, thus characterizing Paul as being led and driven by the same (condemnatory) point of view concerning idolatry and idolaters as God's. Since there is no subsequent *recharacterization*[27] of Paul in this regard, there is no ground for claiming that his attitude or perspective when speaking to the Areopagus is any different (as the conclusion of his argument confirms). This framing of the entire Athens episode has a significant impact on how we must read the speech, and therefore on the subsequent exegetical points under review.

### iv. Paul's Affirmation of the Athenian Religion (vv. 22–23)

Three elements in the introduction of Paul's speech are purported to show that Paul was able to "genuinely" and "with integrity"[28] or "truly and honestly"[29] affirm his audience's religiosity. Let us look at each in order of appearance.

First, Paul says that he observes that "in all things you [men of Athens] are *deisidaimonesterous*." This *hapax legomenon* is singularly responsible for much spilled ink![30] The term is highly ambiguous, both in terms of lexical domain and grammatical form (a stand-alone comparative, possibly having an elative or superlative force). What is clear is that it has to do with an exceptional, maybe extreme, form of religious attitude and practice (especially with the attached "in all things" or "in all ways"). It can, however, be used with either a positive ("religious") or a negative ("superstitious") import. Typically, commentators resolve the uncertainty by making the commonsense observation that no orator in his right mind would begin a speech by insulting his audience! The meaning must, therefore, be positive, "neutral" (factually descriptive, with no value judgment), or at least intentionally ambiguous. That means that either Paul changed his attitude or was able to master himself remarkably.

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[26] For *paroxysmos*: Deut 29:27 and Jer 39:37. For *paroxynō*, examples from the Old Testament books most used by Luke include Deuteronomy 9:7–8, 18–19; 32:16, 19, 41; Psalm 9:25, 34; and Isaiah 65:3. Cf. the parallel use of *parorgizō*.

[27] "Recharacterization" is when an author changes or shifts the way a particular character in the story should be conceived or perceived in the course of a story. It is an intranarrative form of reframing.

[28] Chapman, "Rethinking," 113.

[29] Higgins, "The Key to Insider Movements," 161.

[30] Its cognate *deisidamonia* ("religion" or "superstition") is used by Felix in Acts 25:19, also an ambiguous occurrence.

The picture is much more complex than it might at first appear, however. There is evidence that complimentary *exordia* or openings (viz., *captatio benevolentiae* or winning of goodwill) were forbidden or discouraged when addressing the Areopagus.[31] We even know of a man insulting that very court in his *exordium* and successfully securing the court's goodwill regardless (in Lucian, *Demonax* 11)! Extant sources show that a negative sense for the term *deisidaimōn* was the default usage among *educated* Athenians of the period (the proper historical frame of reference). There is no recorded jeering or reviling coming from the audience, however, which would have certainly happened if they had felt unambiguously reviled. One reason might be that they considered Paul to be a *spermologos* ("babbler" in v. 18, an Athenian slang term), and therefore would have doubted his ability to use *their* language properly. So, it seems that at an intranarrative level, the term is just as ambiguous and confusing to Paul's depicted audience as it is to modern commentators.

However, Luke's micronarrative cues (especially the framing of v. 16), the point of view he has constructed over his two volumes so far, the theology of worship and idolatry he develops throughout, and the Old Testament intertextual matrix of the speech make one thing clear to the attentive reader: the Athenian religion in part and in whole is abhorrent to God and Paul his herald. The term is probably used because it is ambiguous, therefore enabling Paul to avoid making his conclusion obvious from the very start, thus ensuring his audience will listen longer—in fact, the original uncertainty means they will listen carefully in order to ascertain his meaning. In the end, even if what precedes his statement was not clear enough to the reader, the remainder of the speech and its climax leave no doubt.[32]

Second, Paul purportedly says the Athenians worship the true God "without knowing," that is, without realizing they are doing it[33] or without knowing him.[34] Higgins denies that this worship would have been salvific. One can only wonder what worshiping someone unknown or unknowingly

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[31] See Lucian, *Anacharsis* (*De Gymnasta*) 19, and Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 10.7.

[32] This statement corresponds to the basic narratological principle that "what precedes prepares for what follows, and what follows develops what precedes." Besides, note that Paul mentions several features that were considered typical of "superstition" in his discourse (including ignorance and "unreasonable" fear), of which the concerned altar stood as a monumental expression.

[33] Chapman, "Rethinking," 113. Chapman's interpretation depends extensively on an article by Myrtle Langley I was not able to find in any library I had access to, not even the Cambridge Center for Christianity Worldwide (formerly Henry Martyn Archives). He cites approvingly the translation of this clause by the Jerusalem Bible (which is significantly influenced by the inclusivist theology that dominated the Second Vatican Council).

[34] Higgins, "The Key to Insider Movements," 161.

means concretely, especially in regard of the close personal relationship (communion) that is essential to its being acceptable to God according to the Scriptures (cf. Isa 23:19; cited in Matt 15:8–9 and Mark 7:6–7). In any case, Chapman is correct when he points out that "ignorance" is the emphasis of the speech. Indeed, that theme frames the whole speech, in that it forms an *inclusio* bracketing Paul's entire oration (with various echoes interspersed throughout the episode). Where he is mistaken is in adopting a false dichotomy between ignorance and idolatry, thus missing the point of the speech: idolatry *is* the ignorance that must be repented, the sin that offends God and elicits his wrath and eternal judgment. The idolatry in view is not merely the making of physical images, but the false conceptions of the divine being and person behind their design (v. 29, mirroring the second commandment in the Decalogue). This theme of ignorance is, unsurprisingly, part and parcel of the Old Testament anti-idol polemic tradition; it is one of the ways in which idol-worshipers image their idols.[35]

Third, Paul supposedly identifies the altar's "unknown god" with the Creator he heralds (v. 23). It is undeniable that Paul links the two, but one must be careful to discern exactly what kind of relation exists, and which does not. First, it should be noted that Paul does not say that the god associated with the altar or the object of their worship *is* the God whom he proclaims. Here Paul does something that is grammatically subtle but extraordinarily meaningful (and can only be seen in the original language): he shifts the gender of the pronoun to the neuter while both the preceding inscription ("to an unknown god") and the object of his proclamation ("the God who," v. 24) are masculine. At a rhetorical level, this double shift creates a buffer or chasm (rather than a bridge) that keeps the Creator God from being identified with the target of the altar or the object of their worship. What Paul says is that the reality that explains why they would do such a thing—and of which they know nothing—is the God whom Paul is there to make known (reveal) to them. He does affirm that all men are religious because there is a Creator God, but he does not conclude from it that their worship is, therefore, true or acceptable to this God. The remainder of the speech argues that it is the exact opposite that is in view.[36] Their groping is a sign not that they are on the right track, but rather that they are

[35] On this subject, see the excellent book by G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

[36] This is not surprising for someone who wrote, "No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons" (1 Cor 10:20 NIV).

blind to the obvious.[37] Secondly, Paul immediately defines—that is, characterizes or frames—the God he proclaims as the Creator, further increasing the distance and contrast with the object of their worship. It should be noted that ancient Greeks had absolutely no concept of a personal and transcendent Creator God, whatever approximations may have existed in their religion and philosophies. This Old Testament concept was, indeed, *unknown* to them. By changing the frame of reference so radically, Paul makes sure there is no confusion and provides the point of view from which to understand every statement that follows.

### v. Common Ground and General Revelation

The ironic reversal brought about by Paul's characterization of his audience as "ignorant" (set up by Luke's own in vv. 18–21) and of himself as the one agent authorized and sent by that God to reveal his person, work, and will is not only striking but indicates that whatever Paul says subsequently belongs *ipso facto* to the theological category of *special revelation*.[38] Contrary to what is often claimed, Paul's argument is not "from nature" or a form of natural theology but is a compact survey of biblical theology of religions drawing most visibly (but not solely) from Genesis 1–11, Isaiah 40–66, and the Mosaic laws concerning Yahweh's worship and idolatry, to weave its intertextual web.[39] The "framing" of his little exposé informs the reader that the appropriate frame of reference for the language of verses 24–28 is biblical revelation, not Greek philosophy, which implies that it cannot be a recasting of biblical revelation in Greek *categories*.[40] This fact, combined with the mention of the Creator, means that Paul's argument in these verses cannot be construed as "establishing common ground" in the way Chapman, Higgins, and many others claim. It is rather the opposite: Paul creates an

[37] As Paul writes, "as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one'" (Rom 3:10–12 ESV).

[38] This is consistent with Paul's argument in the first three chapters of Romans. The mention of the Creator seems to confirm this categorical identification, for "by faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible" (Heb 11:3 ESV)

[39] Neither Chapman nor Higgins explicitly say that Paul develops a natural theology here (a number of other commentators do, however), but rather that he affirms, recognizes, and uses what (some in) his audience would have believed that was true about creation, before "correcting" what needs to be in light of special revelation.

[40] Much of the scholarly debate over the interpretation of this part of the speech in the twentieth century revolves around how to "disambiguate" his language, which appears to allow either reading (commonly associated with the figures of Bertil Gärtner and Martin Dibelius). The concept of framing and narratological considerations such as "point of view" and levels of reading (from inside or outside the story) are vital in dealing with this issue.

unbridgeable chasm between him and his audience, his God and their gods, his religion and worship and their idolatry. He challenges their worldview as a whole rather than piecemeal, which makes sense because of the systemic and integrated nature of worldview, religion, and culture.[41]

### vi. Paul's Appropriation of Truth from Greek Philosophers and Poets?

The preceding considerations have critical exegetical implications for determining the precise nature of what Paul is doing when using language shared with Greek philosophers or quoting one of their poets. Though there is a formal similarity between the two, there is a world of difference in their respective meanings (due to radically different "frames of reference" or worldviews), not solely in their object or referent.[42] In other words, Paul is not depicted as telling his hearers that they have true beliefs about God or that they ascribe these truths to the wrong object(s). By framing his speech the way he does, he makes their very words mean something completely different from what they intended, because he has changed what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls the "grammar."[43] Words are not "Stoic" or "Epicurean" or "Christian" or anything else in themselves: they take their meaning from the context in which they are set (framed). Hence, for example, the Aratus verse no longer communicates its original Stoic pantheistic message but expresses the biblical notion of humankind's creation in God's image. Paul is neither adopting the Athenians' concepts nor translating his Christian message into their categories. Instead, "familiar terminology is … co-opted and infused with new meaning in light of biblical revelation and the Christ event."[44] This semantic transposition would have been transparent to his audience—they did the same when citing other thinkers!

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[41] Cf. Harvie Conn, "Culture," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 252–54, and Paul G. Hiebert, "Culture and Cross-Cultural Differences," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), 369–70. This is why Hendrik Kraemer insisted that one must have a "totalitarian" (integrated) view of religion, as noted by David J. Hesselgrave, "World-View and Contextualization," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 402.

[42] C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) sets forth a convincing and convicting challenge to the way comparing Christianity to ancient philosophies is almost universally practiced in scholarly circles. His critique applies directly to contextualization-focused readings of Acts 17.

[43] "By placing the vocabulary of pagan philosophy inside the hermeneutical context of creation (vv. 24, 26) and eschaton (vv. 30–31), Luke renders obsolete the original structures of meaning in which the pagan phrases occur and, therefore, radically alters their sense." C. Kavin Rowe, "The Grammar of Life: The Areopagus Speech and Pagan Tradition," *New Testament Studies* 57.1 (January 2011): 45.

[44] Flemming, *Contextualization*, 79.

### vii. Divine Design for World History

This leads us to the last exegetical point. Higgins is correct when he writes, "Paul's use of the altar and the poets is [a] very logical outworking of his worldview," that is, his theology of history, religion, and culture.[45] The same is true of Luke also, who *chose* to include this story in his narrative at this specific juncture and to tell it the way he does. That worldview constitutes a significant part of the frames of reference defining the author's "intended meaning." The "translational contextualization" reading of the Areopagus speech concludes that Paul sees genuine—however much partial and somewhat misdirected—*divine truth* being present and active in the Athenian religion and culture. It therefore finds in the speech its own premise that a kind of commensurability and continuity exists between all human religions and cultures and the biblical faith, which allows the latter to build on the former—and requires merely one to supplement, adjust, and correct them "as needed."[46] In fact, Higgins goes so far as to summarize Paul's purported worldview thus: "The true God has designed the cultures, seasons, and locations of the nations to further the process by which all peoples might seek after and *actually find Him*" (emphasis added).[47] Dean Flemming, who is generally more conservative in his interpretation, says that "God's prevenient grace is at work among people of other faiths and worldviews, *drawing them to himself.*"[48] All religions and cultures are thus deemed to be divinely orchestrated *redemptive* preparations for the gospel. For Higgins and Chapman, they even constitute a sort of "prehistory" to Christianity, parallel to Israel's history of redemption.[49]

Our study, however, has shown that this conclusion is based on a misreading of the speech and the episode as a whole. Neither Paul nor Luke expresses such a notion of continuity, similarity, or identity. On the contrary, they have emphasized the distance between the two, and the need to replace one with the other wholesale. The Athenians are not depicted as genuine truth-seekers who "are doing their best with what has been given them"

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[45] Higgins, "The Key to Insider Movements," 161.

[46] Chapman writes, "It is through knowing Jesus that we know *more clearly* what God is like and what is the standard by which we shall be judged." Chapman, "Rethinking," 121 (emphasis added to highlight the relative or quantitative nature of the claim). Higgins says that Paul's method also involves "point[ing] out areas that will need correction in the light of God's truth." Higgins, "The Key to Insider Movements," 161.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Flemming, *Contextualization*, 83. Emphasis added.

[49] Flemming, however, argues strongly against this characterization. See Dean Flemming, "Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens: Paul's Areopagus Address as a Paradigm for Missionary Communication," *Missiology: An International Review* 30.2 (April 2002): 210, n. 26.

(whose coming short from full truth is "through no fault of their own," to use the expression canonized by Vatican II), but as arrogant, uncomprehending, idle, and mostly interested in a bit of jest mixed with a concern for protecting the city from foreign novelties (vv. 18–21). The speech certainly teaches that there is a (necessary) point of contact for the Christian proclamation: God's creational design for man that was marred by the fall and led to God's abandoning the nations to their rebellious folly (after Babel), leaving them to the "suppression" of the truth so strikingly captured by Paul in Romans 1:18–32. The good news of Paul's message is not that God has been at work (redemptively or preredemptively) among the nations all along, but that he is *now* (emphatic in v. 30) doing a new thing: he has opened the way of salvation that had been closed to them and is consequently calling them to repentance (from their sin of idolatry) and faith (in the risen Jesus) in view of the imminent final judgment of God's wrath. At last, they can "turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess 1:9–10 ESV).

## Conclusion

The only translation of the gospel in Athenian terms recorded in this story is the one attributed to the philosophers in verse 18. Hearing Paul through their own frames of reference (the fundamental pagan worldview shared by both popular religion and sophisticated philosophy), they show (and confess) themselves totally confused, unable to make head or tail of Paul's teaching—so much so that they misconstrue his kerygma as the heralding of two new pagan-style deities, Jesus and his consort Resurrection! It is only when Paul provides the necessary biblical-theological frame of reference that his message is correctly understood by the audience (a structural narrative arc of the episode), though it is not precisely widely embraced.

Unquestionably, other proponents of "contextualization-focused" readings would not agree with all or some of either Chapman's or Higgins's interpretations. Yet, it appears from our discussion that the "translational contextualization" *type* of interpretation tends to read its own worldview and presuppositions into the text (eisegesis) rather than draw them out from it (exegesis). Failing to heed Luke's cues, it exchanges Luke's and Paul's frames of reference for its own and thus significantly alters the meaning and import of the text, turning it on its head at various points. Using the terminology of its underpinning translation theory, it has "re-framed" the text without first "de-framing" it. This common line of interpretation of the

Areopagus speech, therefore, substitutes an abstract, artificial, and alien framework for the original linguistic and narrative contexts. It is not exactly acontextual—for that is impossible—but, more precisely, *anti*-contextual.[50]

[50] This uses the etymological (Greek) meaning of "anti," viz., "in place of" or "instead of," rather than "against."