

# NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

## *Lesson 33*

### Acts – Part Seven Supplement to Part 6

#### **GLOSSARY OF USEFUL TERMS:**

“Athens” (17:16):

Athens was the international center of philosophical study at the time of Paul. The Romans “conquered” Greece in 146 B.C., but the famous Roman poet Horace wrote that in fact “Greece took its brutish captor [Rome] captive and introduced the arts into rustic Latium” (*Epistles* ii. 156-7). Athens had distinct schools of philosophy, including the schools of Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics, and Aristotelians. Philosophical instruction was required for young men of the upper classes. No wonder Athens was home to our most famous early philosophers including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno.

“Agora” (17:17):

Translated “marketplace” in the N.I.V., the *agora* was a distinct section of Athens whose ruins can be visited today. The *agora* was not a seedy marketplace of stalls occupying a bare piece of ground like we might encounter in certain developing countries today. Rather, it was more like a beautiful Italian plaza with an area adorned with statues, famous works of art, and stalls of various sellers. The *agora* was the meeting place of notables and councils. It was in the *agora* that Socrates went “at the hour when it was most crowded” (Plato, *Apol.*, 31 A) to teach and question several hundred years before Paul. Unlike the synagogues where Paul would be limited to Sabbaths and certain other meeting days, the *agora* was available everyday as a meeting place for Athenians, and hence a point of contact for Paul.

“Epicurean Philosophers” (17:18):

Named after the founder, Epicurus, who lived from 341 to 271 B.C., this school of thought believed that philosophy was useful in teaching us how to live. The core problem that caused people to live badly was seen as the fear of death. As Plato taught, “When a man begins to realize he is going to die, he is filled with apprehension and concern about matters that before did not occur to him. The tales that are told of the world below and how men who have done wrong here must pay the penalty there...[They] begin to torture his soul with

the doubt that they may after all be true” (*Republic*, Book 1, speech of Cephalus).

Epicurus taught that this fear of death was the reason people lived to acquire. It also formed the basis for our competitive actions. If we are able to get power, wealth and honor, then we best ensure ourselves of security and protection against premature death, as well as positioning ourselves to live more justly because the temptation to wrong others for gain should diminish when we possess more than we need. Also, we stay constantly busy in this acquisition mode so we might stay distracted from the truth of oncoming death that haunts all.

Part of Epicurus’s solution was to study nature and the world. Epicurus taught that a proper study of nature revealed that the gods are not involved in the world as we see it. An additional aspect of this approach was to realize that no one survived death. Death is the end. Epicurus believed that once we accepted death with no fear of punishment afterwards, then we would no longer fear death and would live more decent and tranquil lives.

Unlike the skeptics of his day, Epicurus taught that the senses were reliable indicators of reality. What you saw, heard, tasted, felt, and smelled were all reliable indicators of “what was out there.” The senses were the criteria Epicurus used to determine whether something was true.

Epicurus believed the human soul was merely a collection of atoms that would dissolve upon death. This was contrary to Plato’s philosophical position, which taught that the soul was immortal and would survive death.

Epicurus did not reject the notion of gods existing. Instead, he rejected the idea that the gods had any concern with mankind or the world. Pointing to the disorder in the world, its disasters and other imperfections, Epicurus believed that the gods either had no regard or were stupid and capricious. Epicurus accepted that there must be gods because of people’s perception in dreams and other ways that demonstrated contact with gods. Because senses were regarded as true, gods must be accepted as reality to Epicurus.

These views also lead to “hedonism” as Epicurus’s guiding ethic. “Hedonism” teaches that pleasure is the ultimate good. This belief, however, did not mean that people were to accumulate vast fortunes for pleasure purposes. Epicurus taught that too much wealth led to dependence upon the wealth itself and a fear of losing it, which would compromise one’s ability to optimize pleasure in life. Pleasure was found, according to Epicurus, in peace of mind and personal happiness.

*“Stoic Philosophers” (17:18):*

The “Stoics” were a main competitive group to the Epicureans for support of the educated Grecian community. We can best understand Stoic teaching by comparing it to the Epicurian concepts discussed above. The Stoics believed in the validity of sensual perceptions, but not in an absolute form as did the Epicurians. The Stoics believed that reason/logic was also involved in determining reality. Thus, if the Epicureans said, “There is a red wall. We know because our senses tell us it is red,” then the Stoics might say, “We perceive there is a red wall, but we do not know if it is red itself or if it merely has a red light shining on it.” SO, the Stoic will invoke reason and ask, “What sensual appearances justify our belief in their reality?”

Stoics believed in an ultimate force of design and purpose in the world. This force was the world’s spirit, which was quite distinct from the Greek pantheon of gods. Where the Epicureans would point out the imperfections in the world, the Stoics believed that if seen from the right perspective, then those imperfections actually made sense in the broader plan of the world.

Stoics did not believe in personal responsibility as readily as the Epicureans. Stoics believed that actions were precipitated by causes. That belief means that the world and our actions are largely determined by what has come before. Personal moral choice is determined by events that precede the choices. Still, the Stoics would assign personal responsibility to choices because many of the “causes” of decisions lie within the individual himself.

The good life to a Stoic involves the use of reason. As we reason through our desires, the Stoics taught that we come to appreciate and take satisfaction in our lives. For the Stoics, “reasoning,” not pleasure, is the ultimate aim of life. By using reason, people can reach happiness more readily. If people try to get health, wealth, friendship, and power, then they risk frustration because so much of that is beyond their own control. Instead, if people pursue reason and sound thinking as an end to life, then people have within themselves all they need for happiness.

A major difference in Paul’s teaching came from Christianity’s/Judaism’s claim that man’s reason and senses alone are not adequate to understand the world and man’s place in it. Core Christian doctrine teaches that we know some truth through the exercise of reason and sense awareness, but to know real substantive truth, man needs revelation from God.

“*Areopagus*” (17:19):

This group was the philosophical and religious “police” of the Athenians. This was a council that drew its name from its meeting place on the hill we know as the “*Areopagus*” still today. Apparently, by the time of Paul, the *Areopagus* would also meet in the *agora*. If one were to visit Athens today, then the *Areopagus* and the *agora* both are easy sites to visit, both at the base of the Acropolis which has the Parthenon and a number of other temples.