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The Areopagus Sermon and Romans 1:18ff: A Study in Creation Theology

Bruce E. Shields

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The Areopagus Sermon and Romans 1:18ff: A Study in Creation Theology

BRUCE E. SHIELDS
Tubingen, West Germany

I. INTRODUCTION

As people in general and Christians in particular are increasingly confronted by questions about the understanding and use of our environment, the study of the biblical doctrine of creation (as both act and reality) becomes increasingly more important. The Old Testament presentation of God as creator and sustainer of the universe is a main element of the framework of the New Testament; this becomes apparent in several passages. Three of these (Acts 17:24-30, Romans 1:18-23 and 2:14, 15) form the object of the present study.

The Areopagus sermon in Acts 17 and the two passages in Romans will be examined, with special regard to what they say about the creation as a vehicle of revelation and how Luke¹ and Paul used these concepts. Discernible will be a unity of both content and usage in the preaching and teaching of the early church of the theology of creation.²

¹The authorship of Acts will not be argued in this study. For convenience, the name Luke is used for whoever the author was.

²Some definition of terms is in order. "Creation theology" and "theology of creation" are used synonymously to refer to the understanding of the creation of the universe by God and the universe as the creation of God. When the term "natural theology" appears, it refers to an understanding of God arrived at through philosophical speculation on the phenomena of the physical universe (nature). By "natural revelation" is meant God making something of himself known through nature.

The scope of the extrabiblical literature is quite limited, but the viewpoints represented in the bibliography present the important schools of thought on these texts and this topic in modern European biblical scholarship.

II. CONTEXT

A valid investigation of short texts must take into consideration the immediate contexts of the texts and also the context of the history out of which they spring. This section seeks to answer the questions: What part do texts play in their total contexts and how do the contexts determine interpretation of the texts?

The larger context of both the Athens sermon and the Roman epistle is not just the New Testament, but the New Testament as part of the tradition of the early church. It is quite clear that Luke and Paul both stood in the same tradition of early Christianity and that their use of natural revelation was not peculiar to them. Nauck³ has indicated how the themes of the Athens sermon appear in other early Christian literature, especially in the Apostolic Constitutions, the Epistle of the Apostles, and the first letter of Clement of Rome. The similar passages deal especially with the work of God in creating and sustaining the universe and with his salvation in Christ. Nauck goes on to show parallels in Jewish apologetic texts aimed at converting Gentiles to the belief in the one God. Conzelmann agrees, although indirectly, when he points out that the correspondence of ideas between Acts 17 and Paul's epistles proves little except that they all stand in the tradition of early Christianity.⁴ Käsemann⁵ goes even further, indicating that Philo and Sirach show the same line of argumentation in use in the synagogues of the diaspora. He also underscores the use of these ideas by the Greek and Roman philosophers and preachers, but this shall be dealt with more when the sources of the traditions and concepts are examined.

The more immediate contexts of the two passages show some basic differences, the major one being that Acts 17 purports to present an address to a non-Christian and non-Jewish audience, with the purpose

³W. Nauck, "Die Tradition and Komposition der Areopagrede," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 53 (1956), 11ff.

⁴H. Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Tübingen, 1963, p. 103.

⁵E. Käsemann, *An die Romér*, Tübingen, 1974, p. 36.

of either evangelism or a legal or philosophical defense,⁶ while Romans is a letter to a Christian congregation. Although none of the scholars in our bibliography seems to deal with this distinction of contexts seriously,⁷ it must be considered if one is to compare them.

It is apparent that the sermon in Acts 17 is incomplete. The name Jesus does not appear, nor does the title Christ. The death of Jesus is not mentioned, and his resurrection appears only as a proof of his assignment as eternal judge. Apparently Luke's intention is to picture the sermon as having been interrupted and prematurely ended by the controversy over the resurrection. He can take for granted that his readers are by now familiar with the content of the gospel proclamation, since he has presented it rather fully in chapters 2, 4, 10, and 13. The reader should understand that Acts 17:24-30 represents the introduction and accusation which would normally lead into the proclamation of God's ultimate revelation and offer of salvation in Jesus the Christ. Luke is, of course, aware of the resurrection as an explosive enough topic to interrupt even the proceedings of the Sanhedrin (see Acts 23:1-10).

The natural revelation of Acts 17 stands as an exposition of God's self-revelation in nature, which is used by the preacher (i.e., the author) as the starting place for the proclamation to the Gentiles of the good news about Jesus.

The immediate context of the Romans passages is an extended discussion of the wrath of God, in which Paul makes it clear that no man can claim righteousness before God except through faith in Jesus Christ. His use of the themes of natural revelation and natural law in this context is to show that all men—Jew and Gentile alike—are responsible and guilty before the righteous God.

Therefore, at the outset of the investigation, it is seen that in neither context are the themes of creation theology primary. The Athens sermon purports to convince Gentile intellectuals of the truth of the gospel; the Romans passages seek to convince Jewish Christians that they are no better or no worse before God than their Gentile brothers.

⁶See T. Barnes, "An Apostle on Trial," *Journal of Theological Studies* XX 1969, pp. 407-419, where the author indicates that the setting of the Athens address could be understood as a formal trial. The argument is not convincing, but holds the question open.

⁷Nauck, pp. 41f., notes the difference but offers no suggestion as to how this recognition should affect interpretation.

One should expect, then, that if identical themes are employed, their use will differ radically in the differing contexts.

III. ANALYSIS

A. Syntactical Analysis

In this section the question is addressed of how the grammar and logical development of these passages present nature as the stage and vehicle of God's self-revelation.⁸

Acts 17:24-30

This passage consists of essentially three parts: the first (24-28) presenting the lofty conception of God, the second (29) stating the expected result which correct thinking about God should produce in worship by his children, and the third (30) proclaiming God's mercy and call to repentance.

The theological statement in 24-28 is quite complicated, consisting of three statements about God, each of which is expanded or modified by other clauses. The first of these statements is negative: He does not live in handmade temples. This declaration is supported by two introductory claims which present God the Creator in a fashion similar to Isaiah 42:5. God is the maker of the world and everything in it, and he is⁹ Lord of heaven and earth.¹⁰ Therefore he cannot be contained in a temple.

Verse 25 presents a second negative statement: Nor is he served¹¹ by human hands. This claim is supported by two participial phrases which play against one another. The author simply dispenses with the idea of God's needing anything in addition to what he already owns and then crushes it with *didous* (gives)—he gives to all life and breath and all things. The logic is cumulative: the maker and Lord of all can no more be confined to a manmade building than can the giver of life

⁸The text upon which this study is based is the third edition of *The Greek New Testament*, published in 1975 by the United Bible Societies. Since textual questions on the passages are relatively few and minor, they are not explored.

⁹The use of *huparchōn* as a simple copula is rather common to Luke and not at all uncommon to Paul—Luke 8:41; Acts 7:55; Romans 4:19; 1 Corinthians 7:26; Galatians 1:14, for example.

¹⁰Conzelmann, p. 98, points out that the fact of creation indicates also continuing control and care.

¹¹This is the only instance in the New Testament where the word *therapeuō* is used in the general sense of serving. The next word, *prosdeomai*, appears only here in the New Testament.

be served by human hands. One could hardly expect a higher statement of transcendence about the creator of the physical universe.

The third statement is positive and comes to the goal of the argument: the correct relationship between God and man. As such it is the most complex of the statements. It begins with the simple declarative: He made from one all nations of men. If a Jew is to tell Greeks how to worship, he must first establish the fact that all races and nations live under the same divine regime—that the world, not only in its creaturely unity, but also in its human diversity, is actually the stage of the activities of the one God. The author makes this claim and attempts to explain some of the diversities and how one can discover this Creator—God.

The relationship of the verb *epoiēsen* (made) and the infinitive *katoikein* (to dwell) is unclear. Is the verb a modal: He made (caused) to dwell? Or is it independent: He created? Eltester and Pohlenz take the verb as a modal, which permits Eltester to bring in the creation versus chaos symbolism.¹² Dibelius and Conzelmann opt for the second possibility, although the modal construction is grammatically simpler. It seems that both the presence of *ex henos* (from one) and the progression of the argument favor the meaning: He created. The infinitive, then, modifies *ethnos* (nation). It could about as well have been a participle, but the infinitive form keeps from reading it in parallel to *prostetagmenous* (determined), which defines an activity of God.

The place of the dwelling of all the nations is the whole surface of the earth.¹³ But this is immediately conditioned by the explanation that God determines limits of both times and habitation. Here is where Eltester's treatment¹⁴ is most helpful, as he substantiates effectively that *kairos* (time, period) here means seasons of the year (and not dispensations of history, à la Daniel, as Pohlenz and Gärtner claim¹⁵) and that *horothesias tes katoikias* (boundaries of habitation) means the dry land bounded by the seas. This does not conflict with the claim that the whole face of the earth is to be inhabited, as does Dibelius' contention that there are specific zones of the earth which are

¹²W. Eltester, "Gott und die Natur in der Areopagrede," in *Neutestamentliche Studien für Bultmann*, Berlin, 1954, footnote on p. 217 and pp. 212-215.

¹³See also Genesis 2:6 and 11:85.

¹⁴Eltester, pp. 212ff.

¹⁵See Conzelmann, p. 99.

utterly uninhabitable. Thus the limitations mentioned here are simply the changing seasons and the dry land versus the sea. This understanding corresponds well not only with normal usage of the words in the first century, but also with the context, which deals primarily with the physical creation rather than philosophical or historical considerations. It is also in line with the use of *kairos* (time) in Acts 14:17.

Verse 27 introduces a second infinitive, *zetein* (to seek), which stands grammatically parallel to *katoikein* (to dwell) but is a much more important step in the logic. Both describe something of human activity, but the living on the earth is rather matter-of-fact, while seeking after God is another level of activity. Or is it? It could be an overly pious mentality which wants to make of religious exercises something higher than just ordinary living. However, the thought progresses here in this second infinitive to lead the reader to see his responsibility to find the true God and to worship him. The process of seeking is *psēlaphaō* (feeling after), and the result should be (note the force of the optative) that one finds him. This should not be too difficult, since "he is not far from any one of us."

At this point, having arrived at his logical destination, the author can stop and concentrate on the message. He first calls on some contemporary philosophical thought forms as witnesses. The first of these (for in him we live and move and exist) indicates just how near man is to God. And the second (for we are indeed his children) indicates a similarity, indeed a near identity, of natures between man and God. Thus he sets the stage for his criticism of idol worship.

Oun, a conjunction which indicates that something follows necessarily from the preceding statement,¹⁶ introduces the criticism *ouk ophelomen nomizein* (we ought to suppose). He attacks not so much the practice of idol worship, as the more basic mentality—the thought that the divinity might resemble something which a man could conceive and form from gold, silver, or stone.

Up to this point the address could be considered a philosophical or theological presentation, but verse 30 changes it into a sermon, as the author introduces God's willingness to overlook *huperidōn* the times of ignorance and his declaration that all men everywhere should repent. This verse proves crucial in the comparison of this sermon with

¹⁶W. Bauer, *Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, 5th edition, Berlin, 1963, p. 1175.

Romans 1 and 2, as shown later. It should be noted here, however, that for the purpose of evangelism, one can hardly conceive of a more effective conclusion to the presentation of the true God and the criticism of false worship. As displeased as God might be with idol worship, if he was really willing to reconcile sinners to himself, the preacher should proclaim his mercy and not just his anger.

The sermon goes on to present the resurrected Jesus as the coming judge, and the idea of the resurrection becomes the stumbling block which closes the meeting. But the presentation of the God who reveals himself in his creation has been effectively made.

Romans 1:18-23

This passage introduces Paul's treatment of the theme, the revelation of God's wrath, which dominates the first three chapters of the letter. The first three verses present three statements concerning God's self-revelation, while verses 21-23 in a series of clauses describe the results of man's failure to recognize God's revelation. The transition (and actually the main purpose for the argument) is simply and clearly stated by the closing infinitive clause of verse 20.

The opening statement, verse 18, begins this series, which progresses in logical order through the passage. *Apokaluptetai* (is being revealed), in the place of emphasis at the beginning of the sentence, begins the discussion on a passive and rather impersonal note. *Orgē theou* (wrath of God) with no article is a specific concept, which Paul develops quite fully in the epistle and against which he contrasts, in several ways, God's grace and mercy. *Ap' ouranou* (from heaven) contrasts, in several ways, God's grace and mercy. *Ap' ouranou* (from heaven) is the source of the revelation here, and the object is the *asebeian kai adikian anthrōpōn* (godlessness and unrighteousness of men). Käsemann points out that the use of these two words to describe the state of man separated from God causes the reader to realize the full extent of the results of human rebellion: "Adikia guards against an understanding of asebeia in merely a religious sense. The whole world belongs to the Creator, including its secular nature."¹⁷ This verse is broad and impersonal, but its last participial clause (the ones holding the truth in unrighteousness) begins to touch the reader a bit, especially since the misuse of truth is defined as unrighteousness and not godlessness, as one might have expected.

¹⁷Käsemann, p. 35, my own translation.

Verse 19 sharpens the approach, claiming that *to gnōston* (the known) is simply apparent among men.¹⁸ Why? Because God made it apparent. Here is the first really personal statement: God manifested it to them. In thus claiming that God controls also his self-revelation in nature, Paul makes progress in personalizing the thought and prepares for the specifics presented in verse 20.

Ta gar aorata autou (for his invisible things) stands parallel to *to gnōston* in verse 19, indicating that invisible qualities can be known. The sentence structure and grammar are complicated here, with the naming of the invisible things appearing later in the sentence (his everlasting power and divinity) following the verb *kathoratai* (have been clearly seen), which is preceded by two adverbial phrases: the prepositional (from the creation of the world) and the participial (being perceived in the works). Again the progression is effective, as it builds the case against the defendant. Time is no factor; the opportunity to know God has always existed for man. The works, by which he presumably means the whole of creation and its orderly functioning, have been there for everybody to examine and ponder. And that which they reveal, God's power and divine nature, is precisely what man has refused to acknowledge.

Therefore "they are without excuse" (*eis to* with the infinitive). Here, in relation to God's righteousness and man's status before God, is Paul's assessment of the Gentiles. Althaus points out that the revelation is there for all to see and respond to, that it is not just in the proclamation of the gospel, but that the proclamation calls men to recognize that which they should have seen in their world.¹⁹ It was Paul's calling as God's herald to proclaim the word which awakened in men the realization of God in and for and also over against the world. And in that awakening men became aware that they should have known him all along.²⁰

But in some sense they did know him. Paul makes it clear in verse 21 that his accusation is not that mankind failed to recognize God but that knowing him they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. Man's basic failing is not stupidity, but the willful neglect of his

¹⁸See Käsemann, p. 35, who translates *en autois* "unter ihnen" and not "in ihnen." The stage of revelation here is nature in general, not the human spirit.

¹⁹Althaus, p. 17: "Die Offenbarung des Zornes geschieht also nicht etwa im Worte der Verkündigung (Luther: durch das Gesetz, K. Barth: durch das Evangelium), sondern ist ein reales, für jeden offenkundiges Geschehen des Menschheitslebens; es wird freilich erst durch die Verkündigung des Gesetzes und Evangeliums als Zorn Gottes erkannt."

²⁰Conzelmann, p. 104, makes this same statement in reference to Acts 17.

correct relationship to God. This involves more than purely religious duties, just as (vs. 18) the object of the revelation of God's wrath includes more than just irreligion. One begins at this point to realize that what Paul is opening to the light here is not God so much as man.²¹

Verse 21 goes on to point up the results of this rebelliousness of man. Käsemann comments on verse 18 that in the context Paul presents immorality not as guilt but rather as punishment.²² And further, idolatrous living is inescapable, since it happens as the predictable consequence of man's refusal to acknowledge the true God.

Verses 21-23 outline a progression in the downward march of mankind: Their thinking became futile; their nonunderstanding hearts were darkened; claiming to be wise, they became fools; and finally they resorted to rank idolatry. Paul's description of idolatry is damning: They exchange the glory of the immortal God for images representing man, birds, beasts, and reptiles—some of the very works in which God was making himself known to them (see vs. 20). The reader has thus been led from the passive, impersonal abstractions of verse 18 to the vivid, active, and personal accusation of verse 23.

Romans 2:14, 15

These two verses dealing with natural law stand in a rather odd relationship with their context, both grammatically and logically. There is, therefore, much disagreement about how to understand them.²³ Käsemann sees 14 and 15 as an illustration of Paul's point that the doing of the law is what is required, not just the hearing.²⁴ Althaus attempts to smooth the transition to verse 16 by adding in parentheses to verse 16, "which will become apparent."²⁵ This helps one jump from the self-accusation of the conscience in verse 15 to the judgment of God in verse 16, but it seems too forced.

Käsemann smooths this transition by defining the conscience as a struggle within the person which is caused by an outside force.²⁶ There

²¹G. Bornkamm, "Die Offenbarung des Zornes Gottes," in *Das Ende des Gesetzes*, München, 1961, p. 21.

²²Käsemann, p. 34.

²³R. Bultmann in *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 3rd edition, Tübingen, 1958, p. 78, and in "Glossen im Römerbrief," *Exegetica*, Tübingen, 1967, p. 283, argues that verse 16 is a gloss.

²⁴Käsemann, p. 58.

²⁵Althaus, p. 24: "wie sich zeigen wird."

²⁶Käsemann, p. 61.

appears, however, neither here nor in chapter 7 (which Kasemann cites) any indication that Paul understood conscience in a sense different from the normal understanding.²⁷

It is not difficult to imagine Paul composing these chapters, attempting to reveal to the readers how mankind—Jew and Gentile, now and later—stand before God.²⁸ He begins in 1:18 with an accusation against the Gentiles which sets the stage for his similar denunciation (2:17ff.) of those who based their security on their possessing the Torah. In 2:1-16 he attempts to balance his remarks between the Gentiles and the Jews. The end of verse 13 connects to verse 16 (those who obey the law . . . will be declared righteous. . . . This will take place on the day when God will judge. . . .). One can nearly see him make that jump only to realize that he had not included for the Gentiles an opportunity to be declared righteous. He then backs off and adds a parenthetical statement to keep his presentation in balance. Some editors have understood these two verses in this way. The Zürcher Bibel puts them between dashes,²⁹ while the New International Version uses parentheses.³⁰

To make the connection Paul reverts to the same claim of natural revelation which he had proposed in 1:18ff., but this time applying it as natural law. He shows in this way that man could know and obey God and also that God's judgment in righteousness applies to everybody.³¹

In verse 13 he has made the point that the doing of the law was required, so in verse 14 he recognizes that at least some³² of the Gentiles were leading lives which displayed the marks of obedience to the Torah. They apparently did the law by nature or instinctively. And whenever this is true, it indicates that those who did not have the Torah were a law to themselves.

Verse 15 shows that Paul understands this state of affairs not as though they just naturally worked things out among themselves, but

²⁷Bornkamm in "Gesetz," p. 112, agrees that Paul uses conscience here just as his contemporary Greek and Roman authors understood it.

²⁸See Bornkamm, "Gesetz," p. 118.

²⁹Zürcher Bibel, reprinted in *Tetrapla*, Stuttgart, 1967.

³⁰*The New International Version*, Grand Rapids, 1973 (sponsored by the New York Bible Society International).

³¹Bornkamm, "Gesetz," p. 98.

³²Kasemann, p. 58: "Vor ethnē fehlt der Artikel kaum absichtslos: Es geht nicht um alle Heiden . . . , aber auch nicht um Ausnahmen."

that an internal kind of law was given. If the work or requirement of the law is written on the hearts of men, then it follows that there would be some sort of inner recognition of obedience and/or disobedience. This recognition Paul identifies in two genitive absolutes, the first of which names the conscience as witnessing with the person and the second names the reasoning faculty (*tōn logismōn*) as sometimes accusing and sometimes defending, not only within the individual, but also between individuals.

B. Literary Analysis

As the foregoing has shown, the logical structure of Acts 17 is quite different from that of Romans 1 and 2. In Acts the beginning point is God the Creator; in Romans it is the revelation of God's wrath. And since according to Romans 1:18 God's wrath is revealed against men's sin, the tone of the Romans passage is generally negative, dealing primarily with the failure of man and rather secondarily with the actual revelation of God. On the other hand, Acts 17 gives three full verses (24-26) and parts of others (27, 28) to a direct exposition of the nature and work of God, the accusation against idolatry being a logical conclusion to this positive declaration.

The Romans 2 passage is much more positive than Romans 1:18ff., and this difference indicates clearly that the negativism of the former text is to show that the Gentiles have no excuse before God for their idol worship. Romans 2:14, 15, on the other hand, turns the searchlight on Israel as having also no excuse for breaking the law, since some Gentiles kept it instinctively.

A clear understanding of the differing purposes of the sermon in Acts and the passage in the Roman epistle should also help explain the radical difference in the two approaches. In an evangelistic sermon such as Acts 17, the preacher would emphasize God's willingness to accept the sinner, while in a polemical passage³³ of a tightly reasoned letter to a Christian community such as Romans 1 and 2³⁴ the emphasis would be on the attitudes and responsibilities of readers already aware of their acceptance by God. And this describes the difference: not of doctrine, but of tone and emphasis.

³³See Bornkamm, "Offenbarung," p. 18.

³⁴Althaus, p. 17, and Nauck, p. 37, understand Romans 1:18ff. as an example of the way Paul would have preached to both Gentiles and Jews. This is hardly convincing, since the tone is quite polemical and not designed to win friends.

C. Source Analysis

Recent research has produced a great deal of evidence of thought patterns and presentations similar in content and style to both Acts 17 and Romans 1 and 2. Nauck compares the Areopagus sermon with three texts from the early church: The Apostolic Constitutions, Epistle of the Apostles, and I Clement; with Jewish literature: two prayers, a Sibyllene fragment, and a mission tract of Aristobulus; and with the writings of Paul. He lists eight themes appearing in Acts 17: creation, maintenance, glorification of God, recognition of God, ignorance, repentance, judgment, and salvation. Each of these appears in at least one of the other types of literature, and three (creation, glorification of God and repentance) appear in all of them.

Nauck has clearly shown that the main themes of both Acts 17 and Romans 1 are common to other missionary and worship practices of both Christians and Jews.

Eltester concentrates on the concepts *Kairoi* (times) and *horothesai* (boundaries) as used by Luke to describe the limitations of man in nature. He demonstrates (citing usage by Philo and others) that *kairoi* referred to the seasons of the year. His exposition of *horothesai* is more involved with the ancient chaos-versus-order mythology, by which he shows that the most likely interpretation of *horothesai* is the boundaries of the land as opposed to the sea. He carries his point too far by insisting that Luke completely shared the ancient mythology.³⁵

Other concepts in the sermon are more readily identifiable. The phrasing of verse 24a (the God who made the world and everything in it) is quite similar to Isaiah 42:5. Verse 25c (does not dwell in handmade temples) has parallels in both the Old Testament and Greek philosophy. The idea (vs. 25) that God needs nothing is basically Greek, but it has also entered late Jewish thinking.³⁶ Verse 26 has its roots in the Old Testament claim that all mankind is descended from the one first man, that man is to inhabit the whole face of the earth (compare Genesis 2:6 and 11:8), and that there is a God-given order in times and boundaries (Psalm 74:17).

³⁵Conzelmann, p. 100, points out that the Bible in general and Luke in particular understand the sea as a part of God's creation and not some mystical force of chaos.

³⁶See Conzelmann, p. 99, where he cites 2 Maccabees 14:35 and Josephus' Antiquities VIII, III.

Verses 27 and 28 contain a larger proportion of non-Jewish thinking. The idea that it is man's responsibility to seek God is certainly more pagan than Old Testament, and that God is not far from any of us has parallels in first century Greek and Roman popular philosophy.³⁷ The reference to their poets in 28b could include both 28a and 28c, the latter of which is definitely quoted from the *Phaenomena* of Aratus. This line has also other parallels in Greek literature, where mankind is defined as the offspring of Zeus, which is here corrected to God, setting the stage for a discussion of correct worship.

Verse 29 offers in concrete terms the criticism of idol worship. The term *theion* (deity) in the final clause is used in this same sense of divinity by Philo and Josephus. More important than the source of any single concept here is the fact that two whole streams of thinking merge in this criticism: Greek philosophy holding that something living can be represented only by something living, and Jewish prophecy declaring that the Creator should not be represented by something created.³⁸ The characterization in verse 30 of idol worship in the past as *chronous tēs agnoias* (times of ignorance) fits with the tone of the whole address and, incidentally, also with Paul's description of the idol worshipping heart as *asunetos* (without understanding) in Romans 1:21.

It is apparent, then, that what we have in this address in Acts 17 is an example of the way first and second century preachers, both Jewish and Christian, combined Jewish scriptural themes with Stoic motifs and popular illustrations to turn idol worshippers to the worship of the true God. Luke here uses philosophical ideas as springboards or as common ground but does not develop a full-blown system of natural theology, as has been done by later Christians.

The general theme of the wrath of God is developed on through Romans 3 but is relevant to the present study only as a reminder that Paul is not developing a theory of natural theology but is to proclaim that no man has an excuse before God.³⁹

To substantiate that the truth has been available, he introduces in verse 19 *to gnoston tou theou* (the known of God) that which is

³⁷Conzelmann, pp. 25f.

³⁸Conzelmann, p. 101. But the idol with which Luke began the sermon shows that Greek philosophy had failed to carry its point, and Goodenough has amply demonstrated that the Jews had also employed artistic representations of divinity.

³⁹Käsemann, p. 34, says simply: "19-21 kennzeichnet die Schuld der Heiden."

recognizable about God, which he has already made manifest among men. Verse 20 defines these qualities as *aorata* (invisible things), which are further explained as his everlasting power and divinity. This line of definition, connected as it is with *nooumena kathoratai* (what can be known is plain), claiming that these divine qualities can be rationally perceived, comes rather directly out of hellenistic philosophy.⁴⁰ In the midst of all this stands the word *poiēmasin* (works), which the Jewish rabbinical scholars would have understood to have special reference to God's work of creation, as does Psalm 103:22.⁴¹ Verse 21b could almost have been lifted bodily out of the Old Testament. Jeremiah 2:5 and Psalm 94:11 make the parallel claims that the works and the thoughts of men are vain or empty. This whole passage displays a remarkable adherence to the thought patterns of the Old Testament, while at the same time making clear its connection with the hellenistic thought-world, through the use of concepts like *gnoston* (known), *kosmos* (world), *theiotēs* (deity), *dialogismos* (reason), and *sophia* (wisom).

Romans 2:14, 15 offers a different case. Far from the Old Testament claim for the exclusiveness of the Torah, Paul here indicates the possibility that these who had no Torah might have had a law from God within them. He introduces the term *nomos* in chapter 2 to show the universal applicability of God's righteous judgment.⁴² To accomplish this he must do in relation to the law what he did in chapter 1 in relation to revelation, that is, show that Jew and Gentile are equally responsible. The concept *nomos* is a common Old Testament theme, but to use it in a statement like "they do by nature the things of the law" is quite foreign to the Old Testament and is in fact specifically hellenistic.⁴³

To go on and say "they are a law to themselves" is another step away from the Old Testament. It has been hinted that this is a direct quotation from Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy; at any rate, the idea comes from there.⁴⁴ Philo went so far as to apply this concept to Abraham. The concept of a law "written on their hearts"—or more precisely, the work or requirement of the law written on their hearts—is,

⁴⁰Käsemann, pp. 35f., citing Test. Napht. 3:2-5, points to diaspora synagogue uses of the same line of thinking.

⁴¹Käsemann, p. 38.

⁴²Bornkamm, "Gesetz," p. 98.

⁴³Bornkamm, "Gesetz," p. 101, points out that the Stoics absolutized *nomos* by limiting it to cases where *nomos* and *phusis* agreed.

⁴⁴Bornkamm, "Gesetz," p. 105.

as Bornkamm puts it,⁴⁵ a good Greek motif. But it is also (especially the way it is stated here) akin to Jeremiah 31:33, which deals admittedly only with Israel, but which nevertheless is a step away from the total dependence on the written law which characterizes so much of the Old Testament.⁴⁶ It seems rather clear that Paul is simply saying that both Jews and non-Jews have received a law from God and will be judged by God on the basis of how they live in relation to that law. To make this pronouncement he is willing to risk employing some terminology out of *lex naturae*. But his formulations are always conditioned by the contemporary Jewish understanding of Torah, which meant, as G. F. Moore put it, "all that God has made known of his nature, character and purpose and of what he would have man be and do."⁴⁷

Two more terms appear in verse 15 which are common to Paul's contemporary Greek and Roman authors and rather foreign to the Old Testament: *suneidēsis*, *logismos* (reason). Bornkamm shows⁴⁸ how Paul's use of conscience would have been clearly understood by his contemporaries but how it also differed from some philosophical thought. Seneca used conscience as a final authority. Philo identified it with God's word. But Paul combined it with the reason as a witness and a help in preparing the individual for the final and authoritative judgment of God. This eschatological function of the conscience sets this passage apart from both the Old Testament and the Stoic or popular philosophy of its day, and it also marks a definite step forward from Romans 1:18ff.⁴⁹

V. CONCLUSION

The comparison of Acts 17:24ff. and Paul's use of natural revelation in Romans 1 and 2 has shown a number of similarities. One notes in general a willingness to mix concepts and thought forms from Jewish

⁴⁵Bornkamm, "Gesetz," pp. 105f.

⁴⁶Bornkamm, "Gesetz," pp. 107-111, criticizes three views of Paul's use of unwritten law. The first (Augustine, Barth) interprets *to ergon tou nomou* as faith, making *ethnē* mean Gentile Christian. This throws natural revelation out of the picture, twists Paul's normal use of *ethnē* as Gentile, and breaks the continuing antithesis between Jew and Gentile here. The second (Lackmann) understands *ergon* in a purely Jewish sense, which can hardly match Paul's purpose here. The third (Michel) suggests that Paul is here remembering Abraham as the model of Gentile righteousness, but the context doesn't support this.

⁴⁷G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, Cambridge, 1954, Vol. 1, p. 263.

⁴⁸Bornkamm, "Gesetz," pp. 115-117.

⁴⁹Käsemann, pp. 61f.

and Gentile thinking in order to make contact for the gospel with the non-Jewish mind. This tendency appears in a few other places in the New Testament (see Acts 14:15-17) and also in other early Christian literature. The approach seems to have been taken over directly from the missionary practices of the diaspora synagogues, with the Christian addition of the person of Jesus Christ, although both Paul and Luke refuse to go so far as to develop fully a statement of natural theology, as some Jewish and later Christian apologists have done. It is generally agreed, then, that the two passages considered here have their roots in the same context of the Gentile mission of the church.

In addition to this general similarity, there are at least six specific themes which are common to both Acts 17 and Romans 1 and 2 (see above, pp. 17f.). But it is true that Paul expresses these themes differently from Luke and that Paul never describes idol worship as times of ignorance, as in Acts 17:30. Käsemann⁵⁰ indicates that at this point there is a radical difference between the two passages. A difference in purpose, form and tone has already been granted. But is it valid to contrast *agnoias* (ignorance) in Acts 17:30 with *anapologētous* (without excuse) in Romans 1:20? The whole exposition in Acts 17:24-29 takes for granted that mankind should have known God and should have understood the foolishness of their idol worship. If that understanding is not there, then any talk of natural revelation is meaningless. In fact, Acts 17:30 does **not** use *agnoias* (ignorance) as an excuse, as Käsemann claims, but simply as descriptive of the practice of idolatry, a use not too different from Paul's *asunetos* (without understanding) in Romans 1:21. The confusion results from reading *agnoias* (ignorance) and *huperidōn ho theos* (God overlooked) as somehow affecting one another.⁵¹ What is being proclaimed here is merely God's mercy, not that he overlooked idolatry because it was done in ignorance. If there were nothing wrong in this ignorance or if it could stand as an excuse, there would be no need for God to overlook it. Nor would there be a need for repentance. It is difficult to see a great distinction between that and Romans 3:23-25:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as

⁵⁰Käsemann, p. 35.

⁵¹One difficulty is that *huperidōn* does not appear elsewhere in the New Testament. This makes it even more important to interpret it in the light of the context.

an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.⁵²

The question as to whether or not there is a relationship between the Areopagus sermon and Paul's natural revelation can be answered with a definite yes. The similarities already discussed demonstrate that Luke did not fabricate the sermon out of his imagination. At the same time, the differences between the two and the complete lack of the main themes of Pauline theology in Acts 17 make it nearly impossible to attribute the Athens sermon as we have it to the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul and Luke have apparently used similar progressions of thought to reach differing conclusions. But those conclusions do not appear so radically different as to rule out the possibility that Paul could have used the same themes with a different tone in his own evangelistic preaching, especially since he admitted in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22 that he felt himself free to approach different people in different ways for the gospel's sake. Bultmann⁵³ uses 1 Corinthians 12:2, 1 Thessalonians 1:9, and Galatians 4:8 to show that Paul would have begun his missionary preaching with the proclamation of one God. Thus, on the question of sermon form versus letter form, Acts 17 is offered as as good a model of Paul's missionary preaching as anything in his epistles.

Centering the discussion on the identity of the authors leads nowhere. More productive would be an attempt to answer the question of why neither of these authors—and for that matter, none of the New Testament writers—developed a detailed natural theology. Did they see dangerous tendencies in the missionary practices of diaspora Judaism? Did they employ more of these developments in their preaching than are recorded in the New Testament? It seems clear that the 20th century has witnessed the failures inherent in concluding too much from natural revelation. It would be interesting to research more of these "redactional-critical" questions.

What do these texts actually say? Paul and Luke both indicate that the message is the important consideration. Just what is natural revelation? In both texts the point of departure, the point of orientation, and the bulk of the content is the person and activity of God as seen in his creation—in nature. It is proclaimed that God has revealed himself

⁵²Paul uses here the word *piresin* which has a force similar to *huperidōn* and which also appears only here in the New Testament.

⁵³R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, New York, 1951, p. 67.

thus so clearly that every man is responsible to recognize him, to worship him correctly, and to live according to his law. Since all have failed in one way or another, all stand guilty before God. Paul uses the concepts of God's wrath and "without excuse" to indicate that every man must turn to God's mercy, which is precisely what Luke proclaims in his call to repentance (Acts 17:30).

Thus Acts 17 and Romans 1 and 2 rather than being contradictory are quite complementary, testifying to the unashamed use by the early church of concepts from contemporary philosophy to proclaim the self-revealing God. They are also a reminder that this same church taught that nature was neither the only nor the primary stage of revelation, but that the revelation in Israel and her Messiah, Jesus, was decisive and final. The theme here is not natural theology, but natural revelation, and this revelation of God in both nature and history is the point of orientation of the preaching and theology of the church.