

The Unknown God

Part II

Acts 17:24

Introduction

In 1798, Napoleon brought his armies to Egypt seeking knowledge of the ancient world, as well as an expanded kingdom of his own. A year after his troops arrived, along with scientists and archeologists, some of his soldiers were demolishing a low wall – and made a remarkable discovery. They stumbled across one of the most significant archeological finds of all time – the Rosetta Stone.

For centuries, the culture, language, and life of this vast empire had remained a mystery because it had been written in what was to modern man, an unknown language – Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. However, the Rosetta Stone unlocked the mystery because carved on that stone tablet was the same message in three different scripts. The message was carved at the top in the picturesque hieroglyphs, then in the middle in a cursive form of hieroglyphs, and most importantly, at the bottom of the stone, the same message was written in the Greek language.

You can only imagine the excitement caused by the Rosetta Stone. After centuries of silence, ancient Egyptian writings could now be understood.

These Egyptian writings revealed everything from:

- preparing a mummy for eternity to . . .
- the technology behind the largest stone monuments in the world;
- the medical practices and farming techniques to . . .
- even the translation of ancient love poems.

The Rosetta Stone was the key that unlocked the mystery of an ancient civilization – the kingdom of Egypt.

In Acts, chapter 17, as Paul stood before the Athenians, he was surrounded by centuries of idolatry. The Greeks had fashioned more than 30,000 statues of their gods and goddesses. All around the apostle loomed those statues of gold, silver, bronze, and stone.

The Greeks, like members of every civilization that has ever lived or will ever live, were desperately trying to unlock the mysteries of the universe. So they worshiped Apollo, whom they believed rode his fiery chariot, the sun, across the sky every day. They worshiped the virgin goddess Athena, whom their proud city of Athens had been named after. And, they worshiped a thousand more gods that they believed were procreated by the union of father heaven and mother earth.

Yet, Athens, and the world of Greece, were still without answers.

In our last discussion, we went back in history to a time, six hundred years before Paul came to Athens, when Epimenides had let loose a flock of sheep from the very spot where Paul now stood. The city of Athens had suffered a terrible plague and Epimenides believed that the sheep must be sacrificed to the angry gods so that the plague would cease. Wherever the sheep lay down, the Athenians were to sacrifice them to the nearest statue or temple. But many sheep lay down without temple or statue anywhere near them, so the people of Athens erected an altar in the belief that they had overlooked some god; a god they

did not know. On that altar, they inscribed the words, “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.”

The Bold Declaration of Paul

Now Paul, after centuries of silence, announces that he indeed knows the name of that unknown God. Notice verses 22 and 23 of Acts, chapter 17.

So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”

Paul says in effect, “Let me answer the mystery of the heavens for you. Let me unlock the century old question of your Pantheon. The missing God, the only true and living God, has a name.”

In verse 18, Paul revealed the name Jesus, (Ιησους). The Rosetta Stone is Jesus Christ and He, Paul declares, in effect, to this polytheistic world, will translate the questions that are in the heart of every human being. Jesus can answer questions such as:

- “Who made me?”
- “Was the universe a result of chance or creation?”
- “If it was created, whose creative power put it together?”
- “If there is a creator who made me and all there is, then am I accountable to Him?”

All of these questions are answered, and more, as Paul delivers this dynamic introduction to the Lord of heaven and earth.

Two points in Paul’s sermon

There are two points in Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill that I would like to give to you. We looked at the first point in our last discussion. In verse 24, Paul declared,

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;

My God is more than a monument!

1. Point number one is, “My God,” Paul said, “is more than a monument!”

He is alive! Back in verse 18b, we discover that the theme of Paul’s message is the theme that sets Christianity apart from every other world religion,

. . . he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

Six hundred years earlier, Epimenides had come up with the right idea but had all the wrong ingredients. There *was* an epidemic called sin and a plague called death. There *was* also an angry God that demanded the death of an eternal lamb to satisfy His wrath. Jesus was the spotless, sinless Lamb who lay down His life; who bore the brunt of God’s wrath and, in so doing, paved the way for all who would believe in Him to avoid eternal death and the wrath of a holy God.

However, that was not the end of the story. That Lamb came back to life; He resurrected from the grave! He is alive and coming soon to rule and reign as Lord of heaven and Lord of earth.

Point number one is, “My God is more than a monument!”

My God made it all!

2. Point number two is, “My God made it all!”

In order to understand the context behind much of what Paul declared to the Athenians, it would help to understand the popular world view held by the Athenians.

Contemporary world views

The world view held by the Athenians is still very popular today. Let me explain that, and also briefly introduce some additional world views. Paul’s words in Athens directly confronts them all.

Polytheism

- Polytheism – the world has more than one god.

This was the world of Athens – and it has become the world of America. Like India with its millions of gods, so America, while maintaining its belief in a supernatural being, has lost its monotheism to polytheism.

This was the world view of ancient Athens and is the current view of modern day Mormons. In fact, Mormon theology believes that our Father God was created by a previous Father God who was created by still a more ancient Father God – and that we are all

headed to our own personal planet where we also will rule as God.

In 1993, approximately 7,000 representatives from more than 125 of the world's religions attended the second World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. They did this a century after the first Parliament of 1893. Everyone at the commemoration agreed on simple adherence to the Golden Rule: "We must treat others as we wish others to treat us."

Lectures and workshops, meditation sessions and ritual dances highlighted the program. A hundred prominent leaders from about a dozen creeds discussed, created, signed, and released a nine-page "Declaration of a Global Ethic." It was a common outline between the faiths decrying environmental destruction, sexual abuse, religious violence, exploitation, genocide, and the like. Its signers pronounced the declaration a historic document, on a par with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A most arresting news item showed a not-so-subtle sign of problems at the Parliament. Incredibly, the word "God" had to be left out of the 5,000 word "Declaration". Why? To include the word "God" would have "excluded many faith groups with different views of God and the divine." In deference to other religions, they dropped the word "God," coming closest in one reference to "Ultimate Reality". At the Parliament of World Religions, the word "God" was offensive . . . "Ultimate Reality" was passable.ⁱ

That is like having a World Parliament of Mathematics and leaving out any reference to numbers. Or, a World Parliament of Medicine and not allowing doctors to attend.

The world searches for the supernatural and yet, ignores the clarion call, the infinite invitation of Jesus Christ, who said, as John, chapter 4, verse 14, tells us,

. . . whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst . . .

Deism

- Deism – one God made the world, then left it alone.

Probably the most famous deist was Thomas Jefferson – whose disbelief in the miraculous caused him to compose his own New Testament gospels. It was a New Testament void of miracles and therefore, void of the greatest miracle of all – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His New Testament ends with the

verse, "There they laid Jesus, and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre and departed."

Deism denies the intervention of God into the affairs of man. While there is a God and He did indeed create all there is, from that point on, He sort of walked away. So God is never involved in His creation.

Deism is not dead, by the way – it was captured in the best selling song "From a Distance," sung by Bette Midler on her CD entitled, "Experience the Divine". The lyrics include the words, "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us . . . from a distance."

God is not watching us from a distance. The Bible teaches that God is intimately involved with His creation. In fact, as we will see in a moment, the apostle Paul will clearly expound a deeply interested and involved treatment of creation by its creator God.

Pantheism

- Pantheism – God is the world, the world is God.

With Pantheism, everything is divine, and the divine is in everything. This is the popular belief represented by Hinduism, Buddhism, and the New Age Movement.

You can certainly understand the popularity of a movement that declares, "You are god," rather than, "You will stand before God," right?"

Atheism

- Atheism – the world has no God.

Doesn't the picture of a world all alone connote such loneliness?

Finite Godism

- Finite Godism – the world has a somewhat limited God.

This view does not hold to the belief in an all powerful creator God. The world evolved by a God who was and is supremely intelligent, but who does not have enough power to keep the world going in the right direction.

Harold Kushner is a popular adherent to this view, primarily because evil exists in the world and bad things happen to people who believe in God. If God were all powerful, shouldn't He . . . couldn't He stop the evil from happening to them?

The scriptures would respond to that as God Himself says, in Isaiah, chapter 55, verse 9b,

... My ways [are] higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.

In other words, because I am an infinite God, there will always remain some mystery as to how My hands move. But, to those who love Me, I have promised, as recorded, in Romans, chapter 8, verse 28, that,

all things work together for good . . .

(not that all things are good, but that all things will work together for good),

... to them that love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

And what purpose is that? Comfort? Health? Prosperity? No, the next verse says, that the purpose of God is that you might be,

... conformed to the image of His Son . . .

Finite Godism says, “We can let God off the hook if we just understand that He isn’t powerful enough to take care of the universe.”

However, in reality, they have not taken Him off the hook, they have taken Him off the throne.

Theism

- Finally, Theism – the world was created by an all powerful, personal God.

Notice back in verse 24 of Acts, chapter 17, Jesus Christ is the,

... Lord of heaven and earth . . .

That is, He is the sovereign master over all that there is.

Daniel, chapter 4, verses 34b and 35, declares,

For His [God’s] dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, “What have You done?”

In other words, this sovereign ruler is accountable to no one. He answers to no one – not even you or me.

Psalm, chapter 103, verse 19, says,

The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all.

What right does God have to rule over all there is? Paul answered, in verse 24a, that God is the rightful ruler of heaven and earth because He is,

The God who made the world and all things in it . . .

Do you know why the heart of sinful rebellious man argues against the fact of theistic creation; the fact that God made everything there is? Because, if He made everything there is, then He indeed has the right to rule everyone that lives. This is then His planet, not ours. This is His animal kingdom, not ours. This is His sun and moon and stars, not ours.

Ultimately, as Paul himself will later declare, and this is the real sticking point with unregenerate man, mankind will one day stand before their creator God and give an account of their works and their worship. Because of that, man stubbornly refuses to acknowledge a creator God – if that domino falls, then we are all in a heap of trouble.

Paul declares, “My God made it all.”

A Biblical Declaration of Creation

Notice that nowhere in Acts, chapter 17, does Paul attempt to prove the existence of God. He simply declares that God is.

Critical passages of Scripture

This is just like the beginning of your Bible, which simply declares, in Genesis, chapter 1, verse 1,

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

In Isaiah, chapter 45, verse 18, the prophet describes God as,

... the God who formed the earth and made it . . .

Jeremiah picked up the same theme as he declared, in chapter 10, verse 12,

It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom; and by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens.

Jeremiah also said words that we sing in a song, in chapter 32, verse 17,

Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You

In the New Testament, we read the same clear, dogmatic declaration. Look at Ephesians, chapter 3, verse 9b,

... God ... created all things

Colossians, chapter 1, verse 16, specifically points to Jesus Christ as the creative agent in the Genesis account of creation. He, the second person of the Godhead, was particularly responsible, for Paul writes under inspiration,

For by Him [Jesus Christ] all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him.

So that is exactly where Paul begins as he addresses a polytheistic Athenian crowd.

Why? Because, I believe, if a person can believe in the first creation by God, then he is prepared to believe in a second creation – the new creation of sinful men and women by redemption. And if a person can believe in a second creation, he will have no trouble believing in a third creation, as described in Revelation, which reveals the future creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

Timeless arguments for a Creator

Now notice again verse 24a – Paul states,

The God who made the world and all things in it ...

Cosmological argument – there must be a cause behind the effects

Paul's original word translated "world" is the Greek word "kosmos". It is a clever choice of words simply because Homer, the ancient hero of Athens, used that word to speak of the Greek system of order in their government. Another brilliant Athenian named Plato, used the word to refer to the order in which a woman put on her makeup – this layer first, then that layer. He probably got into trouble with Mrs. Plato for using her as an illustration in his Philosophy 101 class!

The basic meaning of "kosmos" includes the idea of arrangement and order. When the word came to refer to the universe, it carried with it the idea of order in the universe.

One of the arguments for creation by God is the cosmological argument; that is, since we see the

effects of order, there must be a cause behind the effects.

Teleological argument – complex design demands a divine designer

Another argument for creationism is the teleological argument; that is, the creative complexity of creation demands a divine designer.

Let me give you a couple of examples as we wrap up our discussion. And let me say, I do not consider myself an apologist, especially when it comes to science as illustration. Science was one of those classes I barely survived in order to graduate!

I am kind of like that little five year old boy who came home from Sunday school very excited. His teacher had told the class the story of Adam and Eve and that Eve was created from Adam's rib. A few days later, he was running around and he got a cramp in his side. He ran up and announced, "Mommy, I think I'm having a wife."

Like him, I will admit that I am way over my head, but I do love to read and research.

The first illustration of creation's wonderful design which demands a designer, comes from a book written by an unbeliever. A bio-chemist has rocked the establishment with his publication entitled, *Darwin's Black Box*. In this book, he argues that complex systems could not have evolved, they must have been designed. Let me read some edited comments from his book.

In the 1800's, Darwin's time, the cell was just an unopened black box (that is the idea behind the book title). Darwin assumed that the inside of a cell was simple. Ernst Haeckel, a Darwin disciple, believed that a cell was, "a simple little lump of carbon." This was before the invention of the kind of technology that would allow us to see inside a cell with all of its complexity. Darwin did not have that ability, but this is what Darwin went on to say, "If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down."

The advent of the electron microscope has allowed the investigation of the complexities at the cellular level. An example of an irreducibly complex system (that is, a system that has to have A-B-C-D . . . happening in order and if any step is pulled out, the system breaks down), consider the clotting of blood after the cut of a skin. Blood clot formation seems so familiar to us that most people do not give it much

thought, unless they are people, such as some in our church, who have hemophilia in their family and then, they give it a lot of thought. Biochemical investigation, however, has shown that blood clotting is a very complex, intricately woven system consisting of a score of inter-dependent parts. The absence of any one of a number of the components causes the entire system to fail – blood does not clot at the proper time or at the proper place. There is a scientific diagram with many lines called the “cascade” which shows the system that operates in your body so that blood clots. If you pull any one of the points out of the formula, the entire system collapses. This biochemist is saying that this kind of irreducibly complex system cannot evolve because it is dependent on other things to happen.

He says, “Could this irreducible complexity have evolved by a gradual process? The fact is, no one on earth has the vaguest idea how the coagulation cascade came to be.”

That is a point that we, as believers, would argue a little with him over.

“Blood coagulation,” he goes on to conclude, “is a paradigm of the staggering complexity that underlies even apparently simple bodily processes. Faced with such complexity beneath even simple phenomena, Darwinian theory falls silent.”ⁱⁱ

The average person who has been taught Darwinian evolution since grade school would never be told of Darwin’s personal anxiety caused by his theory. He had rejected the biblical account of creation and, in fact, the biblical God – and he paid a heavy emotional price.

He wrote a letter to a friend who evidently, believed in God the creator. It was published in 1888, along with many of his letters and notes. Let me quote these words:

I am conscious that I am in an utterly hopeless muddle. I cannot think that the world, as we see it, is the result of chance, and yet I cannot look at each separate thing

*as the result of design . . . again I say I am, and shall ever remain, in a hopeless muddle.*ⁱⁱⁱ

The apostle Paul answered Darwin when he wrote in Acts, chapter 17, verse 24,

God who made the world and all things in it .

..

In other words, every separate thing is created by the Divine Designer.

One more illustration, this time from a medical doctor named Paul Brand. His book entitled, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, includes another designer truth hidden inside the human cell that Darwin never saw.

Locked away inside each cell nucleus is a chemically coiled strand of DNA. Once the egg and sperm share their inheritance, the DNA chemical ladder splits down the center of every gene much as the teeth of a zipper pull apart. DNA re-forms itself each time the cell divides; 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 cells, each with the identical DNA. Along the way, cells specialize, but each carries the entire instruction book of one hundred thousand genes. DNA is estimated to contain instructions that, if written out, would fill a thousand six-hundred-page books. A nerve cell may operate according to instructions from volume four and a kidney cell from volume twenty-five, but both carry the whole compendium. The DNA is so narrow and compacted that all the genes in my body’s cells would fit into an ice cube; yet if the DNA were unwound and joined together end to end, the strand could stretch from the earth to the sun and back more than four hundred times.^{iv}

The apostle Paul declared to the crowd gathered on Mar’s Hill, “You have searched for the truth of the supernatural – I’m here to give you the Rosetta Stone to that mystery. To translate Christ is to understand the mystery of the universe.”

With authority and courage, this grand ambassador of Christ declared, “My God is more than a monument,” and “My God is the creator of all things.”

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ⁱ Dr. Ramesh Richard, *The Population of Heaven* (Moody Press), p. 70.

ⁱⁱ Michael Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box* (The Free Press, 1996).

ⁱⁱⁱ Roy Zuck, *Vital Apologetic Issues* (Kregel Publications, 1995), p. 123.

^{iv} Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Zondervan, 1980), pp. 45-46.