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# When Apostles Become Philosophers

Rubén R. Dupertuis

Trinity University, [rdupertu@trinity.edu](mailto:rdupertu@trinity.edu)

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determined that the use of this theme in Acts is an apologetic device that lacks historical validity (see also the cameo essay, "When Apostles Become Philosophers," p. 60).

### **References**

- Dupertuis, "*Parrēsia*, Opposition, and Philosophical Imagery in Acts"
- Pervo, "My Happy Home"
- Smith, "Rethinking the Acts Story"

### **The Votes of the Fellows**

#### **Red/Probable**

- Luke composed the miraculous healing in Acts 3:1–10 on the basis of Luke 5 and similar accounts.
- *Parrēsia* ("free speech") is used in Acts in an intentional attempt to echo philosophical literary imagery.
- *Parrēsia* is consistently associated with stories of opposition in Acts.
- *Parrēsia* is used in Acts in contexts which evoke the claim of a divine commission authorizing the right to speak "with boldness."
- *Parrēsia* is used in Acts to portray Christian leaders as Socratic figures.
- The use of philosophical imagery in Acts is an apologetic device to legitimate Christianity as a movement led by true philosophers.

#### **Black/Improbable**

- Acts provides historical evidence that Peter was a miracle worker.
- The characterization of the early Christian leaders as "bold speakers" is an historical datum.
- Acts 3:1–26 is historical.
- There was widespread support in Jerusalem for the early followers of Jesus.

## **When Apostles Become Philosophers**

A Cameo Essay by Rubén Dupertuis

No other death in the ancient world was as well known as that of Socrates. By the early Roman imperial period, Socrates had become the pre-eminent martyr, the prototype of the philosopher unjustly accused, tried, and executed. His prominence is due, in part, to being the subject in some of the writings of his students, Plato and

Xenophon, which became standards of the Greek educational curriculum. In the literature of the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods, Socrates' death became a widely imitated model of how to die nobly. Given the importance of Socrates as a cultural model at the time, it is unsurprising that the author of Acts effectively "Socratizes" the apostles.

A good place to see this is in the description of Paul's visit to Athens in Acts 17:16–34. Acts describes Paul addressing (*dialegomai*) people in the market place every day (Acts 17:17), using the precise terms Plato used to describe the activities of Socrates that eventually got him in trouble.<sup>8</sup> Paul soon encounters some philosophers, some of whom refer to him as "a dilettante" (*spermologos*) and others who take him to be a promoter of "alien gods" (*xenon daimonion*, Acts 17:18). Paul is then taken to the Areopagus, where the philosophers say to him, "May we learn what this novel doctrine you are talking about is? Since you are propounding alien ideas, we certainly wish to know just what point you are trying to make" (17:19–20). The accusations against Paul echo the charges against Socrates, which Plato records as follows: "Socrates is guilty of corrupting the youth and of not honoring the gods the city honors, but other *new deities*."<sup>9</sup> Xenophon records a similar version of the charge: "Socrates is guilty of not honoring the gods honored by the state and of *introducing other new deities*. He is also guilty of corrupting the youth."<sup>10</sup>

While Paul may not be formally on trial in Athens, the change in venue to the Areopagus does create a trial-like situation. For although the Areopagus is not the site of Socrates' trial in the literary tradition, by the early Roman Empire the association of that site with being questioned or judged was relatively common in literature. In addition, while Paul's subsequent speech is not a formal "apology" or defense, it certainly has the feel of one, given that he is responding to questions and concerns that evoke the accusations for which Socrates was brought to trial in Athens.

The speech Paul delivers to the inquisitive philosophers on the Areopagus continues the echoes of Socratic traditions. His first words, "Gentlemen of Athens," recall Socrates' manner of addressing the Athenian jury in the first lines and throughout Plato's *Apology*.<sup>11</sup> Paul then notes the Athenians' religiosity, which is manifest in the inscription "to an unknown god" (Acts 17:23). Paul volunteers to fill in the details of this god, whom they already have on their radar. Central to Xenophon's defense of Socrates in his *Memorabilia* is the argument that Socrates' religious practices

were not foreign, outlandish, or weird, but were at their root really not different from the practices of any other devout Athenian. Similarly, although Paul may be using terms the Athenians don't recognize, he is really only speaking in greater detail about something they already accept. By placing Paul's subject under the heading of something they already acknowledge, however obliquely and not without some ignorance (17:30), Paul avoids "introducing" new deities, the charge leveled at Socrates and the concern voiced by the philosophers whom he is addressing.

Paul concludes his speech by introducing the notion of God's judgment:

God will overlook past failures that were due to ignorance. For the present, God invites all people everywhere to change their lives, for God has set a time at which he intends to judge the world justly by a man he has selected, in proof whereof God has raised this man from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

At first glance this may not sound particularly Socratic, but Socrates also spoke of a judgment after death. At the end of Plato's *Apology*, Socrates sees his impending death as a good thing, for it might allow him to be judged by truly righteous judges.<sup>12</sup> And while Socrates' understanding of life after death is surely different from Paul's (or Luke's), both conclude their speeches with this subject.

Acts' description of Paul's activity in Athens, the famous home of Socrates, is rich with echoes of the Athenian philosopher. Paul is, put simply, dressed in Socratic garb.



### Sharing Possessions in the Community

**4** <sup>32</sup>The body of believers was one in heart and soul. Not even one of them would say, "That's mine," about any of their possessions, but they held all in common. <sup>33</sup>The apostles continued to give very powerful testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and all enjoyed an abundance of divine favor. <sup>34</sup>None of them was in need, for all who owned land or houses sold those objects and placed the <sup>35</sup>proceeds at the disposal of the apostles; they were distributed in accordance with need. <sup>36</sup>Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles nicknamed "Barnabas" ("preacher"), <sup>37</sup>had a piece of property. He sold it and gave the money to the apostles.