

The Aseity of God

But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. ¹⁴ Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed. ¹⁶ Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. ¹⁷ Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. (Acts 17:13-17)

Six hundred years before Christ was born, a terrible plague broke out in the city of Athens. The citizens began sacrificing to the gods to end the plague. Though Athens had shrines to every known Greek god, all the sacrifices they had made on all these altars had not stayed the hand of the plague. The people consulted the Oracles who said that a man named Epimenides, who lived in Crete, must be called, for he would know how to save the city. Epimenides was fetched, and when he arrived, he realised that if Athens, with all its shrines to all these gods, had not appeased the gods, there was only one possibility: some god unknown to the Athenians was plaguing the city. He told the city elders to gather up a flock of black and white sheep, take them up onto Mars Hill and release them and then follow them from a distance. If instead of grazing, one or more of them lay down, those who followed them were to mark that spot, build an altar there, and sacrifice that sheep. Supposedly, it would mean that the god, not yet known to them, had accepted that sheep as an offering. A number of sheep did lie down, and the Athenians built altars and sacrificed them there. The plague lifted from the city.

Some of those altars were eroded by time, but at least one was built and preserved by the stonemasons, and given the inscription *Agnosto Theo* – to an Unknown God. Almost seven hundred years later, the apostle Paul would come across that altar and use it to preach the God of the Bible to the pagans in Greece.

Though Athens was very religious, Paul would tell those Greeks how unique the God of Israel was. Today you will meet people who will say something like, “All religions are really the same” or “Each religion or spirituality is just a different way up the same mountain, but they are all saying the same thing.” But if we are serious people, if we are thoughtful people, we will ask such a person, “How do you know that the differences between religions aren't greater than the similarities? Yes, all religions share similarities, since they all attempt to answer similar questions. But how does that make them different versions of each other?”

In fact, if we study the attributes of God, we will find that there is truly no other God like Him. No one is like the triune God – not the pagan gods of antiquity, not the many gods of paganism, not the distorted god of the cults and apostate religions. And if there is no God like Him, then faith in Him, and the worship of Him is unique.

Paul certainly didn't think that the gods and religions in Athens were just another acceptable spiritual journey. Paul wanted to stress the uniqueness of Israel's God, and therefore the uniqueness of faith in Him, and salvation by Him.

Let's set the scene. Paul was a missionary, going about planting churches. In Acts, we read of three missionary journeys Paul took, and this account occurs during his second one. He had just come out of a bruising experience in Philippi, where he was beaten, and placed in stocks. He was almost the victim of mob violence in Thessalonica, and narrowly missed it again in Berea. So the believers in Berea send him to Athens as a kind of safe-place, to wait for Timothy and Silas to catch up.

But Paul is Paul, and while he waits for his companions, he cannot but become vexed and grieved by the idolatry. After all, he is in Athens. Even though the glory days of Greece were now long gone, Athens remained the capital city for Greek philosophy and mythology. The Romans had really just adopted much of what the Greeks taught and believed, and given the gods Roman names. Athens was not the centre of power like Rome, or the commercial centre like Corinth, but it was still a stronghold of Graeco-Roman paganism and the philosophy that Greek was famous for. As Paul walked about, he would have seen altars and shrines to all kinds of Greek gods: Zeus, god of the sky; Hera, goddess of marriage, Poseidon, god of the sea; Ares, god of war; Athena, goddess of wisdom; Apollo, god of archery, music, poetry, prophecy, and later on the god of the sun; Artemis, goddess of the moon. There were gods for everything: blacksmiths had Hephaestus, for agriculture there was the goddess Demeter. For love you turned to Aphrodite, if you wanted blessing on the roads, you looked to Hermes. Nemesis was where you turned for revenge, while you drank wine you thanked Dionysus for it. Nike was the god of victory, and there was even Hypnos, the god of sleep. When you died, Hades was the god of the underworld. There were still others – gods and goddesses of the sky, of the sea, gods of the earth, gods of the underworld, gods of magic, beginnings, choices, crossroads and doorways. There were still other minors gods for abstract things such as justice, strife, youth, memory, wealth, safety.

So picture Paul, as he spends a few days in this city, seeing all these shrines, altars and temples. Paul is a radical monotheist. He was zealous for the God of Israel before his conversion, and once he came to realise that the one true God is the triune God, he was now driven by love to preach Him to all. He is becoming more and more incensed and grieved at the idolatry of man, turning from the knowledge of the true God, and multiplying false gods made in man's image. Paul begins witnessing about Christ both in the synagogue, where he would have spoken to Jews and Gentiles known as God-fearers, and in the agora or marketplace.

At some point, he is noticed by the intellectual elite.

¹⁸ *Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.*

By this time in history, Greek philosophy was primarily made up of two opposites: Stoics and Epicureans. Epicureans believed the goal of life was essentially pleasure and avoidance of pain. They believed when you died, that was it, and were really deists – they believed the gods did not interfere in life. The Stoics believed a life of reason and self-mastery, in harmony with nature. They were really pantheists – believing God is in everything and everything is in God.

At some point, some of these philosophers heard Paul. Now when Paul spoke of God, he did not use the term Zeus, who after all, was the son of other gods. He would have used *Theos*, which was a generic term for a god. That wouldn't have drawn attention. Probably it was the name Jesus, Iesous, that made them think he was introducing a foreign god not yet recorded in Athens. Maybe when he used the Greek word for resurrection, *anastasis*, they thought he was referring to a goddess. Some call him a babbler, which literally means a seed-picker, one who pick up ideas and pretends he knows what he's talking about and acts knowledgeable.

But being a people who enjoyed collecting new and exotic ideas, they invite him to come and present this extra god, not yet added to Athen's great pantheon.

¹⁹ *And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?"* ²⁰ *"For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean."* ²¹ *For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing*

else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Now the Areopagus was a court of law where the intellectual elite decided on matters of religion and education. They may be taking Paul half-seriously, but Paul knows that he has been given a unique opportunity to publicly proclaim the God of Scripture to this group.

So as he is escorted up to Mars Hill, he is no doubt preparing in his mind how to contrast the Greek gods to the true and living God. Paul does not want these Greeks to think that Israel's God is just another god. He does not want them to think he is simply another national deity, with the usual superhuman powers or appearance, with the same lusts and desires as the other Greek gods has.

So what Paul does is select that truth about God which is absolutely foundational to the true God. This attribute is the starting point to understand the true God, and it is also an attribute unknown in the gods of pagan religion – self existence. His self-existence. Sometimes called self-sufficiency, sometimes called solitariness, sometimes called independence, it is the attribute of God that comes out clearly in this account.

²² Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; ²³ "for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:

Paul seizes upon the altar which remained from the days of Epimenides. It is not that the Athenians understood that this god was Yahweh. But Paul probably knew the history, and he knew that the God of Israel is sovereign over plagues. The God who had actually removed the plague was indeed the God of Israel, but he was not one God among many. He was not even the best of all gods. He is the only God. Look how Paul begins.

I. The True God is Self-Existent

"God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, (Acts 17:24)

Paul begins exactly as the Bible does. He assumes God's existence, and puts it before the cosmos. The true and living God is not part of the universe. The unknown God was not one of the first ones to appear in the universe. The true and living God had always existed, and it was He who made the world and everything in it.

This was a staggeringly new idea to the Greeks. In Greek mythology, the furthest back in time you can go is to a time when a kind of dark place and substance called Chaos was in existence. Chaos gave birth to five gods – Gaia, Tartarus, Erebus, Nyx, and Eros. These five gave birth to another generation of gods. These, in turn gave birth to a group of twelve gods called the Titans. The Titans gave birth to the Olympian gods.

But in Greek mythology, every god is generated by another god, and usually by the union of a male and female god. Even the first five just emerge from some pre-existing stuff – Chaos, and no one can explain, and perhaps no one was asking, how did Chaos get there? Who made Chaos?

Here Paul is saying, the true God did not come into existence. The true God existed.

Philosophers have wrangled over how to prove the existence of God. They have used five classical arguments to attempt to prove He exists – the cosmological, the teleological, the ontological, the moral, and the anthropological. But you notice the Bible never does that. It assumes God's existence

as a presupposition, as an *a priori*, as something without which you can't make sense of anything else. Genesis 1:1 does not begin "God truly exists. You can believe He exists because.." No, Genesis begins by assuming God, and telling you in the first few words what God did to bring the universe into being.

To doubt God's existence is the equivalent of a man saying he wants to discuss a maths problem with you, on condition that he gets to deny that the number 1 exists. No fruitful discussion happens after that, right? So it is when we, who are right now in existence, right now we are living beings, when we deny the existence and being of the self-existent Being.

Every created thing or creature has what we call contingent existence. That means we exist because of some other factor. We have parents, who had parents, who had parents, as far back as you can go. We did not have to exist. But God is the one Being whose existence is necessary. He is self-existent. His being had to be, and always was. He did not cause Himself; He is uncaused.

Little children get used to asking where things came from. At some point, they ask, "who made God?" And if you are introducing them to the true and living God, you bring a concept into their minds which they up till that point have never encountered: no one made God. His life came from nothing outside of Himself. No life had to be introduced into Him, nothing was given to Him, nothing was added. He did not begin, and He did not develop. Within Himself was perfect, full, eternal existence.

It is what Jesus said of the Triune God when he said, "*For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, (Jn. 5:26)* God has life in Himself.

This is all captured in the personal name of God, revealed to Israel. Yahweh. This name is the idea I AM. I exist. Not I exist because of, or I exist for the reason that, merely I exist. I exist in that I exist. I AM that I AM. I have been, I am, and I will be. No human can say, "I AM", and it is a complete sentence. But God can.

Underived, uncreated, unbeginning, unending, Being.

Paul is doing to these Athenian philosophers what we do to our four year-olds when they ask, where did God come from? God simply was. And everything that is, came from Him, because He is Lord of Heaven and Earth. This was totally different to the pantheism of the Stoics, who said God was creation and creation was God.

Paul doesn't argue this, He doesn't prove it, He asserts it. It is foundational, and if you reject that foundation, you must go to some other foundation, like God who spontaneously emerged out of Chaos, or a universe that came from nothing, which long ago exploded in a Big Bang from nothingness into everythingness.

But Paul now moves from the fact of God's self-existence to its implications.

II. The Self-Existent God is Self-Sufficient

does not dwell in temples made with hands. ²⁵ *"Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.*

If there is a self-existent God, what that implies is that He has no needs. Specifically, at the end of verse 24, you don't need to house Him. The pagan gods had their temples where the god was to

reside. But the God of the universe does not need shelter, much less shelter made by the creatures He made in the first place.

Solomon saw the irony of making a temple for the self-existent God, when he prayed at the dedication of the Temple: “²⁷ *“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built! (1 Ki. 8:27)*

God is self-sufficient. If the true God has life and being in Himself, then creation did not meet a need in God. Men were not created to fill up something missing in God. ⁵ *“Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything*

When Paul says worshipped with men's hands, the word for worshipped in the original is *therepeuetai*. Our English *therapy* and *therapeutic* are derived from this, and it means to help, to care for, to heal. God is not helped, or cared for, or even strengthened by men's hands, as if He had needs. Why? Because all things need Him. He gives to all life, breath, and all things. Fountains don't ask rivers to re-fill them. The Sun does not ask the Earth for a little return-heat. Mothers don't look for sustenance from their babies.

God does not look to His creation to meet his needs.

A few moments later, Paul is going to re-emphasise that the relationship between man and God is unilateral: He supplies, and we receive: ²⁸ *“for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’ (Acts 17:28)*

Now this idea of God being self-sufficient is painted humorously for us in Psalm 50.

⁷ *“Hear, O My people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you; I am God, your God! ⁸ I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices Or your burnt offerings, Which are continually before Me. ⁹ I will not take a bull from your house, Nor goats out of your folds.¹⁰ For every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine. ¹² “If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world is Mine, and all its fullness. ¹³ Will I eat the flesh of bulls, Or drink the blood of goats? ¹⁴ Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High. (Ps. 50:7-14)*

God says to Israel, you have got the wrong idea about all the animal sacrifices I require. I don't ask for them because I need them! I don't call for these sacrifices because I'm hungry, like the ridiculous pagan gods. I own every animal in the world already. And if it were possible for me to be hungry, Israel, I certainly wouldn't come to you and ask you to cook for Me! The God who made the cosmos with His Word hardly needs to order His food from Israel!

But I wonder how many Christians labour under a false idea that God is somehow needy. Oh, they would quickly disavow that statement, but in practice, they act like they are meeting God's needs. They evangelise because it seems God needs workers. Some missionary presentations almost suggest you should feel sorry for the predicament God has got Himself into, and become a missionary or support a missionary to help out. Some Christians come to church thinking that worship somehow meets a need in God. He must need our praise every week, so let's not ask questions, and get on with it.

These are low views of God. God is self-existent, and being self-existent, he is completely self-sufficient, completely independent.

Job 22:2 *“Can a man be profitable to God, Though he who is wise may be profitable to himself?*

Job 22:3 *Is it any pleasure to the Almighty that you are righteous? Or is it gain to Him that you make your ways blameless?*

Job 35:7 *If you are righteous, what do you give Him? Or what does He receive from your hand?*

³⁴ *“For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?”³⁵ “Or who has first*

given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?"³⁶ For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:34-136)

God did not create the universe to meet a need in Himself. No deficiency, no lack, no desire for growth or change prompted God to create. In the being of God, the joy God has always had in Himself, Father in Son, Son in Father, in and through the Spirit, overflowed into creation. Creation was not a need, but a gift, a gift of the Godhead to one another, in which God's beauty and perfect life could now be reflected and refracted and magnified like never before.

And when God set in motion the plan to redeem us from sin, it was not to meet a need in Himself. Again, it was gift. It was part of a plan to display His grace. that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in *His* kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:7)

The implication of this self-sufficiency and independence is that God is gloriously happy. A god with needs is a god with frustrations. A god with needs is a god incomplete and less than joyful until completion. But a self-existent, self-sufficient God has been, is, and ever will be, perfectly happy.

Now it is true that God expresses pleasure and displeasure over the actions of men and angels. But these are external to His self-sufficient being. Since creation is not necessary to God, nothing that happens in creation is necessary to His perfect joy.

Again, how many Christians labour under a view of God who is frustrated, restless, impatient, fretting?

If you know the true and living God, it is perfect freedom. He needs nothing from you. His happiness is not dependent on you. You worship Him not to meet a need in Him, but because He delights to share His beauty. You evangelise and obey and serve not to complete God, but to grow into His perfected image, to learn of Him, to do His will.

Now we might take this truth of God's self-existence and self-sufficiency and go in the wrong direction with it. Paul's third point helps us to see this attribute

III. The Self-Existent God Is Seeking Mankind

Now God doesn't need anything, but that does not mean He is aloof.

*²⁶ "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings,²⁷ "so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;
²⁸ "for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'*

This perfectly self-sufficient God stooped down to make man, and loved them enough to choose every nation's boundaries and times. He providentially watched over their cultures, in the hope that they would seek Him. Here is a self-existent, self-sufficient God, who is intimately involved in the affairs of men. Why? Because as independent as He is, He is not far from every one of us – He sustains us, our beings exist because of His being. Paul quotes from one of their poets Aratus, to make the point, God has made us all, and done so freely and deliberately.

²⁹ "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.³⁰ "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,³¹ "because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." (Acts 17:26-31)

So, Paul says, since this self-sufficient God has made us in His image, how foolish to make God in our image. How foolish, Greeks, to make these gods like Zeus and Apollo and Hera, which are nothing more than superhuman versions of yourselves, with all the powers you wish you had, pursuing all the lusts you presently have.

How foolish, modern man, to make gods of sentimental tolerance, a faceless god who loves whatever perversion or lust we seek out, who is again, an invisible version of yourself, with all your perverted loves and lusts condoned and smiled upon by him.

Instead, Paul says, we must repent of idolatry and worship Him. Love Him for who He is, for His beauty, for His glory, not because it meets His needs, or because we can use Him to meet ours.

God has had patience with the world, not judging them immediately for their idolatry. But now with the coming of the Son of God, and His resurrection from the dead, the times of patience have turned into a demand from God: forsake your idols. Repent of sin, and turn to Him in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Paul has declared a God unknown in pagan mythology. The god was either so transcendent as to be unknowable, or so immanent as to be hardly respectable. The god was either so far removed and untouched with our needs, or a hungry, devouring god demanding things from us.

But here you have a self-existent, self-sufficient God who needs nothing from us, but seeks us, pursues us, reveals Himself and calls us.

This is what the 20th century preacher James Boice captured in his hymn:

*Nothing exists that God might need
for all things good from Him proceed.
We praise Him as our Lord and yet,
we never place God in our debt.*

Is that the God you know and worship?