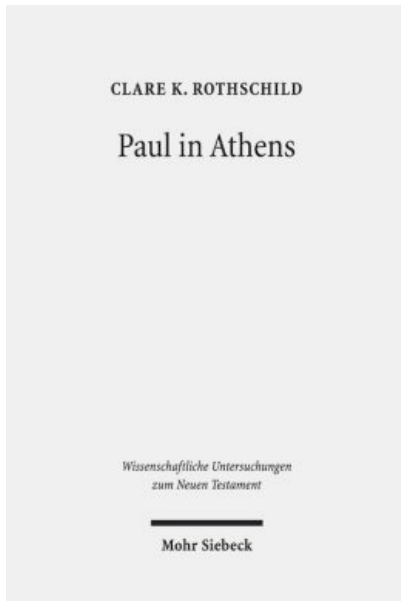


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Paul in Athens: The Popular Religious Context of Acts 17

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Clare K. Rothschild is Associate Professor of Theology at Lewis University (Romeoville, Illinois), editor of several book collections (e.g., *Apocalyptic Imaginations*), and a prolific author of many articles, essays, and book-length studies (e.g., *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History*). True in this book and elsewhere, her written contributions reflect judicious reading, clear argumentation, and substantial dialogue with New Testament scholars and classicists. These traits make Rothschild a significant voice in New Testament studies whose writings from the last dozen years speak for themselves.

In *Paul in Athens*, Rothschild credits her study to a suggestion of Hans Dieter Betz: “that Paul viewed himself as, in part, a cult transfer figure” (ix). She finds the same dynamic at work in Luke’s presentation of Paul, specifically the Areopagus speech of Acts 17:22–31. Despite the seemingly ad hoc nature of Paul’s visit to Athens, Rothschild identifies the passage as a climactic narrative moment that builds on a nexus of traditions around the figure of Epimenides: “Beginning with the traditional attribution of Acts 17:28a to Epimenides, the study hypothesizes that Luke makes Paul speak in character (i.e., *προσωποποιῶ*) in order that he might ‘appear’ at the highpoint of the narrative as this ancient Cretan seer, the individual accredited with transferring Cretan Zeus worship to Athens.... [This] met one of the author’s most important literary goals, namely to present

Paul as the early Christian cult transfer facilitator *par excellence* (κτίστης, οἰκιστής), a representation Luke knew, at least in part, from Paul's self-descriptions in his letters" (4).

In addition to front and back matter, *Paul in Athens* comprises nine chapters and an appendix. Chapter 1 (the introduction) persuasively introduces the book's thesis. Scholars have long regarded Paul's speech in Athens as both a high point of Acts but also a muddled mix of traditions. Rothschild argues that its primary significance lies not in Paul's engagement with philosophical traditions but in Luke's portrait of Paul as a cult transfer facilitator.

Chapter 2, "History of Research," reopens a question widely dismissed by New Testament scholars of late: whether the citation of Acts 17:28a ("In him we live and move and exist") may be credited to traditions surrounding Epimenides (the *Epimenidea*). The attribution held sway among interpreters both ancient (e.g., Theodore of Mopsuestia) and modern (e.g., Kirsopp Lake), until two twentieth-century voices (M. Pohlenz, H. Hommel) shifted attribution toward Stoic sources. Rothschild challenges this status quo attribution, due especially to the historic prevalence of the *Epimenidea* and Luke's lack of clear interest in Stoicism. Furthermore, Paul's activity in Athens parallels Epimenides closely: "For Luke, *both* Paul and Epimenides are strangers from afar summoned to Athens to fix a mistake; *both* announce that the tomb of their god is a lie; and, *both* transfer eastern cult traditions to Greece through Athens" (24).

Chapter 3, "Text and Translation," gives Rothschild's assumptions about Acts and her text and translation of Acts 17:16–34. Following Pervo, she places Acts in early second-century Asia Minor but associates it with ancient historiography. Rothschild also notes that many English translations wrongly emphasize the presence of philosophers (v. 18) and a presumed antagonism between Athenians and Paul.

Chapter 4, "*Epimenidea* in the First Two Centuries C.E.," generates a portrait of Epimenides from ancient sources: a popular poet, philosopher, and legislator, as well as purifier and "Greek seer *par excellence*" (37). Most relevant to Acts are two particular notions. The first entails Epimenides being summoned from Crete to Athens to eradicate a plague. By advising Athenians to sacrifice on the Areopagus, he purified the city. "Hence even to this day, altars may be found in different parts of Attica with no name inscribed upon them, which are memorials of this atonement" (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 1.110). The second tradition entails a fifty-seven-year nap taken by Epimenides, after which he awoke, identifying him as divinely favored and loosely associated with resurrection ideas.

Chapters 5 ("The Areopagus Speech") and 6 ("Bracketing the Areopagitica") are the book's most exegetically substantial. In the former Rothschild interprets Paul's Areopagus

speech in view of Epimenidean traditions and Greco-Roman literary topoi. She argues that Paul's association with the Areopagus, references to an altar "to an unknown god," the identification of an unnamed deity, the statement in verse 28a, and an emphasis on resurrection are all clear allusions to the *Epimenidea*. In the sixth chapter she characterizes Paul not merely as accused (like Socrates) but genuinely as a proclaimer of foreign divinities (Acts 17:18, 20). Rothschild argues that the surrounding narrative has several archaic elements (Areopagus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Damaris) that evoke the distant past of classical Athens. Collectively, the two chapters suggest that Luke portrays Paul as an "Epimenides *redivivus*" figure welcomed by distinguished members of the ancient Athenian high court (107).

Chapter 7, "Acts and *Epimenidea*," reflects broadly on commonalities between the Paul of Acts and the *Epimenidea* to show not literary dependence but "that the Lukan Paul fits the general paradigm of an ancient cult transfer figure" (108). Rothschild briefly names fourteen points of contact, some of which are more compelling (e.g., call stories) than others (e.g., tattoos). Even if some of the similarities are not overwhelmingly pronounced, the chapter rightly addresses the question of larger narrative parallels between these traditions.

Chapter 8, "God in Transit: Paul Transfers Christianity to Athens," builds on the work of Elizabeth Gebhard to argue that Luke "models Paul's missionary activity in Acts 13–28 on the conventional literary pattern of cult transfer narratives" (121), a pattern readily visible in the *Epimenidea*. While admitting that "Luke does not slavishly adhere to the prototype" (124), Rothschild shows where Gebhard's ten elements of the cult transfer pattern (crisis, oracle, command, embassy, difficulties, arrival, welcome, accommodation, opposition, temenos) may be discerned in Paul's activity in Acts 16–17 (transfer to Athens) and Acts 21–28 (transfer to Rome). "The purpose of Luke's reliance on the formula is to highlight Christianity's safe, successful, peaceful, and legal transfer to Europe and beyond" (131).

Chapter 9 is more provocative than its title ("Conclusion") suggests. After summarizing the preceding chapters, an "epilogue" on Crete associations in Acts argues that "Luke" was a Cretan who adopted the persona of Titus. Based on Titus's historic association with Troas (2 Cor 2:12–13), absence in Acts, and shifts to first-person language at Troas (Acts 16:8, 11; 20:5, 6), Rothschild suggests that "an author adopting Titus' persona" wrote Acts, "explaining the depiction of Paul as the Cretan hero, Epimenides" (136). An appendix follows on the significance of "sleep" language in Luke's narratives and the *Epimenidea*.

Paul in Athens is a model of superb scholarship: focused, refined, researched, and clearly argued. Characteristic of her work, Rothschild's book perceptively illumines features of

Acts that resonate with literary topoi from the Greco-Roman world. Aimed at scholarly audiences, her work reflects emerging points of consensus in Acts studies—as a second-century work, influenced by various literary traditions, intentionally reflective about Paul’s legacy—and builds on these with her own original contributions. These traits make *Paul in Athens* a work of gravitas that merits careful consideration by all interpreters of Acts.

Where *Paul in Athens* argues for the *Epimenidea* as influential to Acts 17:16–34, the book is persuasive. Rothschild’s larger claim—that Luke portrays Paul as a Christian cult transfer facilitator par excellence—is argued effectively but may not persuade all readers. Potential obstacles lie not in inherent flaws in her argument but in whether it truly explains the larger narrative terrain of Acts. For example, that “chapter 17 is the climax of the Book of Acts” (120) is possible but not unambiguously clear. That Luke depicts Paul’s missionary work as “a series of cult transfers” (131) is also a constructive reading but with its own abiding questions, such as the role of Philippi in Acts 16:11–40, the role of Paul’s custody experiences in Acts 22–26, and whether Paul truly transfers Christianity to Rome in Acts 28:11–31. (The suggestion that Luke was Cretan is equally interesting, with its own set of accompanying questions.) Also, the book’s use of “succession” and “transfer” language for its thesis is a potential strength for its clarity and consistency (120, 131) but at the same time has significant (potentially negative) implications for the narrative’s view of the movement’s Jewish roots at the ending. Challenges aside, the refinement, balance, research, and clear reasoning that accompany Rothschild’s arguments make *Paul in Athens* a compelling study for even the most skeptical readers.

Paul in Athens is a work of fine scholarship that reflects broad awareness, new advances in scholarship, and a constructive interpretation that challenges traditional assumptions about Acts 17:16–34 and the narrative’s engagement with the *Epimenidea*. For these very reasons, interpreters of Acts will reckon with, learn from, and be indebted to Rothschild’s study for many years to come.