

## PAUL'S APOSTOLIC SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AT ATHENS\*

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While a sizable body of interesting literature may be found (which, in iceberg fashion, seems to increase upon closer scrutiny) dealing with Paul's Acts 17 speech in Athens, certain aspects of his remarks<sup>1</sup> there have received little attention. It is not surprising that much of what has been written has been concerned with the Greek philosophical background and content of the sermon. One might wonder, however, at the paucity of material treating its Jewish-Christian or Old Testament background and motivation.

The critics generally deny any connection whatsoever of this sermon on "Mars Hill" with the Old Testament, or, in fact, with the Apostle Paul. Dibelius said of the address:

This is what the author considered, at the end of the first Christian century, to be a suitable example of the sort of sermon which ought to be preached to cultured Gentiles!... What is seen here... is the manner of constructing a Christian theology not on biblical, but on philosophical, especially Stoic, ideas. The true parallels to this speech are found not in Paul but in Cicero and Seneca and their Greek predecessors.<sup>2</sup>

Even those who accept Luke's record<sup>3</sup> as historically reliable, and

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1. Our presuppositions here that Luke accurately quoted a historical speech of the Apostle Paul in Athens are in spite of the charge of such higher critics as W. C. van Unnik that such reflect "a certain naivete." W. C. van Unnik, "Luke-Acts, A Storm Center in Contemporary Scholarship," *Studies in Luke-Acts* (Schubert Festschrift, edited by Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn, 1966), p. 30.
2. Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (1956), p. 82. Van Unnik says the speech "reveals a natural theology of a completely un-Pauline character" (van Unnik, *op. cit.*, p. 26). In the same volume another critic says that "no one in the Galatian or Corinthian churches would have recognized in the pages of Acts the Paul they had heard preach or had read in his letters" (Ervin R. Goodenough, "The Perspective of Acts," p. 58), while another sums up the critical position by saying that "we must interpret the Areopagus Speech first of all as a literary speech of Luke, not a real sermon by Paul" (Hans Conzelmann, "The Address of Paul on the Areopagus," p. 218).
3. Although Luke may have patterned Acts along lines suggested in the latter part of Isaiah (compare Acts 1:6-8//Isaiah 49:6; see references to Isaiah in the margin of Nestle's text throughout Acts), I see less cause for embarrassment in believing he simply arranged true material to suit such a program as in assuming that he invented his material per se.

therefore regard his account as an authentic quotation of Paul's actual words in Athens, have more frequently than not limited their discussions to Hellenistic, not Old Testament terms.<sup>4</sup>

It is well established that the sermon, taken as a whole, and in many of its specific elements, may be best seen in the light of Stoic philosophy of the first century (Paul is addressing his audience in terms they understand), and that in style it follows closely on the order of missionary preaching of the various Hellenistic philosophers. And it is frequently conceded that Paul's reference to God as creator is reflecting, at least in a general way, his own Old Testament background and faith (or—again, at least—that put forward by Luke as Paul's faith). I should like to go one step more, however, and suggest that the remarks of verses 24-25 provide us with a key to Paul's own self-consciousness on this particular occasion in the light of his apostolic commission from Jesus Christ, that these verses constitute an argument for accepting that Paul the Apostle did, indeed, make these remarks, and that the remarks which follow those verses are motivated by his peculiar sense of responsibility as Apostle to the Gentiles for the name of Christ.

#### I. ISAIAH 42:5

At the very beginning we notice that the affirmation of God as universal creator (Acts 17:24, 25) employs the words, not of Genesis 1:1, or some such passage,<sup>5</sup> but of Isaiah 42:5.<sup>6</sup> That passage appears in the Septuagint as follows:

*Houtos legei kurios ho theos ho poiesas ton ouranon kai pexas auton, ho stereosas ten gen kai ta en aute kai didous pnoen to lao to ep autes kai pneuma tois patousin auten.*

The words *ho theos ho poiesas...ta en aute...kai didous pnoen*<sup>7</sup> are quoted verbatim from the LXX. Paul substitutes *ton kosmon* for *ton ouranon kai ten gen*, though he includes those terms in an additional

4. Note Calvin's observation: "Because he hath to deal with profane men, he draweth proofs from nature itself; for in vain should he have cited testimonies of Scripture" (John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, II); also see H. B. Hackett, "The Discourse of Paul at Athens, A Commentary on Acts 17:16-34," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 6 (1849), pp. 338-356.
5. Some have interpreted *ex henos* in verse 26 as an allusion to Adam and Genesis. H. P. Owen, "The Scope of Natural Revelation in Romans I and Acts 17," *New Testament Studies*, 5 (1958-59), p. 135. Helmut Flender also sees the Old Testament creation story reflected throughout the address. Helmut Flender, *St. Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History* (1967), p. 68.
6. The fact that Paul quotes Exodus 20:11 to describe God as creator in another situation (Acts 14:15) seems to me to stress the significance of the particular quotation here. And while his use of the Isaiah passage here may reflect an appeal for Stoic interest on the basis of certain philosophical terms which Paul inserts, at the same time I believe more is involved than that and hope to demonstrate that in the course of this paper.
7. *Pnoe* had been used in connection with creation by Philo; it is also interesting to observe that Paul inserts *kosmos* and *panta* in the quotation, both terms of significance in Stoic cosmology.

comment. Isaiah and Paul both have *ta en auto/aute*. Paul shortens the rather bulky *to lao to ep autes kai tois patousin auten* to a simple *panta*, and says that God gives *zoen* where the LXX has *pneuma*. Two other very significant statements are made in the same sentence: God does not inhabit handmade temples; God cannot be served by human hands. Both these remarks deserve close consideration, as to background and intended contrast on that occasion, but they are beside the point of this article.<sup>8</sup>

Several questions may be raised. Why does Paul quote Isaiah 42:5, instead of Genesis 1:1, or some other passage, for that matter? What importance may be attached to the Isaiah 42 pericope? Would that context have special meaning for Paul personally and, if so, would that significance carry special weight on this specific occasion? I hope to show that the use of words from Isaiah 42:5 is not accidental, but that in Paul's own mind this entire pericope occupied an important place—a place which would be very much in his thoughts as he stood before the philosophers in Athens.

Isaiah 42:1-9 deals with the well-known *Ebed Yahweh*, Yahweh's Servant. The first four verses introduce the Servant to Yahweh's people;<sup>9</sup> in verses five through nine Yahweh addresses Himself to the Servant and commissions him. These verses fall into three parts. In verse five, Yahweh asserts His own authority as creator and giver of life. Paul quotes this verse to the Greeks. In verses eight and nine, Yahweh again affirms His deity in contrast to all molten images. Between these two affirmations Yahweh commissions the Servant. He says:

*Ekalesa se . . . kai edoka se eis diatheken genous, eis phos ethnon anoixai ophthalmous taphlon, exagein ek desmon dedemenous kai ex oiku phulakes kathemenous en skotei* (LXX).

This same charge is repeated in Isaiah 49:6-9. (There the Servant is "Israel," but the individual Servant stands for and represents Israel by the concept of "corporate personality." The New Testament writers considered these texts parallel as we shall see.) In that passage Yahweh says:

*. . . Idou tetheika se eis diatheken genous eis phos ethnon tou einai se eis soterian heos eschatou tes ges. . . . Kai edoka se eis diatheken ethnon . . . legonta tois en desmois Exelthate, kai tis en to skotei anakaluphthenai.*

Predominant in both passages is the divine appointment of the Servant as (*eis*) a covenant of the Gentiles, an opener of blind eyes, and a deliverer of those in bonds and in darkness. The question now arises,

8. See Eduoard Des Places, "Actes 17,25," *Biblica*, 46 (1965), pp. 219-222.

9. The words of Isaiah 42:1-4 are quoted by Matthew (12:18-21) and applied to Jesus Christ. Dodd has shown that this passage was generally understood by the New Testament writers as fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, and has established that such testimonia passages were often used as a context, even when particular words were lifted and used in isolation. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (1952).

Does this theme—found in both passages of Isaiah (one of which is quoted in part by Paul at the Areopagus)—have any special meaning for the Apostle Paul?

## II. PAUL'S APOSTOLIC COMMISSION

The only detailed account of Paul's specific call to the apostleship is given in his address before King Agrippa (Acts 26:16-18).<sup>10</sup> According to that account, Paul first had a heavenly vision, before which he fell to the ground in fear and reverence. He was told by Jesus to stand up on his feet, for He would send him on a mission.<sup>11</sup> As the record continues, Jesus tells Paul that He will be with him to protect him during the accomplishment of this mission,<sup>12</sup> which includes testifying before Jew and Gentile, even before kings.

Specifically, Paul is sent to the Gentiles (in the words of Isaiah 42:7, 16) as Christ's special emissary, to turn them from darkness to light, to transpose them from Satan's domain to God's, and to give them forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified.<sup>13</sup> By his commission, Paul is placed in the service of Christ as Apostle (*ego apostello se*) to the Gentiles.<sup>14</sup> Paul tells Agrippa that he has been faithful to that charge, and has preached to Gentile as well as Jew (vs. 19). He affirms that light is come to both by the resurrection of Jesus, in fulfillment of the prophets and Moses (vvs. 22, 23).

The pairing of light/Gentiles occurs in Christ's words to Paul (Acts 26:17, 18) and in Paul's own testimony to Agrippa (vs. 23). This is also in keeping with Isaiah 42/49, where the two go together as we have already seen. Just as Yahweh's Servant in Isaiah 42:1-4 is affirmed by the New Testament writers to be Jesus of Nazareth, so the Servant's mission (in 42:5-7 and 49:6-9) regarding the giving of light to the Gentiles<sup>15</sup> is now carried out through Saul of Tarsus, who becomes not

10. Again we assume that Paul spoke these words, this time with some critical support. See J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (1959), p. 29.
11. This reminds us of Ezekiel's appointment. He also had a theophany (1:4-28), fell on his face (1:28) and was told to stand up and receive a divine charge (2:1, 3). See also Daniel 8:17-19; IV Esra 6:13, 17; Enoch 14:14, 24 ff.
12. As was Jeremiah, another Old Testament prophet (Jer. 1:7, 8). On this point compare also Acts 18:9, 10//Isaiah 41:10; 43:5. On another occasion Paul freely uses words taken from Isaiah's commission (Acts 28:25-27//Isaiah 6:9, 10), a setting, interesting enough, which finds Paul in contact with Jews but speaking of his mission to the Gentiles (v. 28). Along this line Munck wrote: "When Paul applies these biblical expressions to his own call, he must be thinking... that that call is... a history of salvation in line with those Old Testament figures." Munck, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
13. See the same themes in retrospect in Paul's letter to the Colossians (1:12, 13). For a critical distinction between Paul of Acts and Paul of the epistles see Viehauer's article in *Studies in Luke-Acts*.
14. The *title* "apostle" is applied to Paul only twice in Acts—14:4, 14), and then in the plural, with Barnabas. The *function* is seen throughout the book in the missionary preaching of Paul, and this is in keeping with the picture Paul gives of himself in his epistles.
15. We have seen already that this was understood by Paul in terms of the resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps it is significant here that Paul's own physical sight was lost, then regained, during this encounter with Jesus and his subsequent conversion and commission.

the Servant but special Apostle to the Gentiles for the name of Christ (Acts 9:15).<sup>16</sup>

One question remains. Is there any indication that in Paul's actual ministry among the Gentiles he worked in conscious awareness of the Servant charge of Isaiah 42/49, which had played a part in his own special call? That must be answered affirmatively. Twice in the book of Acts, Paul makes use of these very verses from Isaiah,<sup>17</sup> and to these two occasions we now turn.

### III. PAUL'S USE OF ISAIAH 42/49

Paul first uses Isaiah 42/49 at Antioch of Pisidia, and in a negative manner. He and Barnabas there accepted the invitation of the synagogue rulers to address the Sabbath assembly (13:15), and proceeded to preach a sermon in the form we have come to know as *Heilsgeschichte* (13:16-41). When this was so well received that the audience returned for more the following Sabbath, the Jewish partisans contradicted Paul and Barnabas and reviled them (13:42-45). Whereupon Paul (cf. 14:12) responded: "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles" (13:46, RSV). Then, under the rubric, "for so the Lord has commanded us" (relating this both to his commission and the prophetic background), he justifies turning to the Gentiles by quoting Isaiah 49:6 (13:47).

Paul's ministry among the Gentiles of Antioch resulted from the Jews' rejection of his gospel message. What is important here, though, is that Paul grounded his Gentile mission in the prophetic word of Isaiah 49:6-9 (which we have already seen to be parallel to 42:6-9), applying that to his apostolic service in the name of the risen Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

The other time Paul uses Isaiah 42/49, he does so in a positive way, addressing the Greek philosophers of Athens in Acts 17:24, 25. We know from his epistles that Paul was zealously aware of a special duty to the Gentiles, whether wise or unwise (Rom. 1:14). At the same time, he

16. "Throughout his missionary career, Paul, whilst ever conscious that Christ Himself is the Servant *par excellence*, repeatedly reminds his listeners that in his own apostolic labours the work of the Servant is being carried forward." David M. Stanley, "The Theme of the Servant of Yahweh in Primitive Christian Soteriology and Its Transposition by St. Paul," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (16), 1954, p. 416. See Romans 10:15, 16, 20, 21; 11:26, 34; 15:20, 21; II Corinthians 5:17-6:2; Galatians 2:8, 20; see also L. Cerfaux, "Saint Paul et le 'Serviteur de Dieu' d'Isaïe," *Studie Anselmiana*, 27-28 (1951), pp. 351-365.
17. The use of Isaiah was common enough in Christian teaching and self-understanding from the time of Jesus onward (Luke 4:16-21; 24:44-48). Paul certainly would have been very familiar with the Old Testament text (Acts 26:4-7; Gal. 1:14).
18. Dodd lists Isaiah 42/49 in *According to the Scriptures* as part of the substrata of Old Testament contextual testimonia, but does not discuss the New Testament usages of these passages at any length. Nor does F. F. Bruce in his *New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (1968).

was confident that not all would accept his gospel of the cross and resurrection, especially among the *sophoi* of this world (I Cor. 1:18-30). Yet he remained convinced that what he announced concerning Jesus Christ was the wisdom and power of God, quite apart from any man's opinion or estimation of it. Paul had been personally called by Yahweh's Servant, once Suffering but now Risen, and he had been charged by Him with preaching the Gospel and so making Christ's prophetic ministry among the nations a reality.

Now, at Athens, Paul stands among the elite of the worldly wise. In this city "totally given to idolatry," his spirit paroxysms within him as he reflects on the ignorant worship of a civilization which does not know his God.<sup>19</sup> As he views this situation, the words of Isaiah 42/49 come to mind once more, the words used by the prophet of the then-future Messiah and by Christ in Paul's own commission almost twenty years before this moment in Athens:

I have given you for a light to the Gentiles, to open the eyes of the blind, to lead out those bound in chains and those sitting in darkness out of the prison house.

For Paul, these words from Isaiah meant the preaching of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen by the power of God (Acts 26:22, 23). Somehow he must give this word to the Greeks before him.<sup>20</sup> An inscription to *Agnosto Theo* gives him an opening. "I tell<sup>21</sup> you of this very God," Paul begins. And then, in words based on Isaiah 42:5, he does just that.

I do not question the Greek nuances of Paul's remarks which follow, nor the appropriate manner in which he brings his distinctive message to the Athenians.<sup>22</sup> The literature abounds along those lines. I do suggest that the ministry in Athens ought to be regarded, so far as Paul is concerned, in the light of the prophetic role of Jesus of Nazareth, the Servant of Yahweh of Isaiah 42/49; that Paul consistently viewed his own apostleship to the Gentiles in terms of the Isaiah passages, via his personal commission from the risen Jesus; and that the speech of Acts 17 finds its motivation in this special self-consciousness of the Apostle Paul.\*

19. Compare Isaiah 41:29; 42:8//Acts 17:16, 17.

20. He does this in 17:31. In preaching the resurrection, Paul must have preached the death of Christ as well, though that is not specifically mentioned.

21. Paul uses *kataggello*, one of his regular words for the preaching of the gospel. (See Acts 13:38; 15:36; I Cor. 2:1, 2; 9:14; Phil. 1:16, 18; Col. 1:28).

22. J. H. Maclean, "St. Paul at Athens," *Expository Times*, 44 (1932-33), pp. 550-553. Flender defends Paul against charges of compromising the gospel here and argues that he (is at least represented by Luke to have) simply suited his approach to his pagan audience. Helmut Flender, *op. cit.*, pp. 66 ff. Evangelicals who continue the popular accusation against Paul that he somehow "watered-down" the gospel on this occasion would profit from this critic's defense. If the argument of the present paper is correct, Paul is seen in a commendable light as he responds with apostolic consciousness to the pagan Athenians.

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