

Men are from Mars Hill
Rev. George M. Schwab, Ph.D.
February 20, 2017

Acts 17:23

(NA 27th ed.)

(NIV)

διερχόμενος γὰρ καὶ ἀναθεωρῶν τὰ σεβάσματα ὑμῶν εὔρον καὶ βωμὸν ἐν ᾧ ἐπεγέγραπτο· Ἄγνώστῳ θεῷ. ὁ οὖν ἀγνοοῦντες εὐσεβεῖτε, τοῦτο ἐγὼ καταγγέλλω ὑμῖν.	For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.
--	--

Line 1 ends with *ana+theōreō*. Think upward+theorize. Line 3's *heuron* is like "eureka!"—"I found it!" *Epi-graphō* is "writing upon." See "agnostic" in "unknown," line 4. NIV shows the inscription as being all capital letters—but originally, of course, the entire Greek New Testament was written in all caps, as well as every copy, for centuries. Line 6, see *kata+angellō*, "according to" + "to bring a message" = "proclaim."

You know the story. Paul was provoked by the many idols of Athens. In the Areopagus ("Ares Rock" = Mars Hill), he addressed the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who spent their time "in nothing except telling or hearing something new." He observed that they were very religious. Among their idols was an altar to "the unknown god." This contentless deity served as a blank slate on which Paul could sketch the doctrine of God and salvation in an evangelistic sermon.

When I first read Acts, I remember feeling that Paul was being—how can I put it—disingenuous? They erected a shrine to any god that might have been accidentally skipped, sort of like the tomb of the Unknown Soldier honors an unknown man, and Paul simply co-opts it for his own purpose? That is what I thought at first. But boy was I wrong.

I think that the key to understand the passage is in the psychology of Mars Hill. What was actually going on with the acknowledgment of the unknown god is that for all of their idols, for all of their religiosity and devotion and spirituality, they still felt deep down that there must be more. Their gods left them empty. All of their deities lacked worthiness and real substance—and the shrine to the unknown one was thus the most honest and true object of worship in the Areopagus. A silent cry for help.

Paul naturally could tell them what they were missing. The God he preached fully satisfies hearts—although not all of the listeners accepted this at the time. He sketched out what we humans need. A God who is everywhere and all-powerful. A God who watches our actions and holds us accountable—thus giving meaning and purpose to our lives. A God who saves us from ourselves, and who saves us from death itself. A God more vibrant and active and involved and bigger than anything they worshiped in Athens.

Doesn't Mars Hill remind you of our world? Our culture is quite diverse, and filled with various competing philosophies that try to make sense of it all. But at the end of the day they fail to satisfy. What we need is a personal relationship with Truth, with Light, with Life, with the Word. Impersonal philosophy was never what we needed, and can't fulfill us.

While they may laugh at first when we share our faith in Jesus' resurrection to them, just keep it up. Keep living out the gospel before them to incarnate your witness. Some will want to hear more. Some will be drawn despite themselves. And as many as are "appointed to eternal life" will believe (13:48).