

An Unknown God

By Vasiliki

"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription - 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortal's life and, breath, to all things."

(Acts of the Apostles, 17:22-25)

A group of Athenians — male and female — Greek and Barbarian — atheist and devout — gathered round the *Areopagus* — Ares' Hill. Some listened with curiosity, others with cynicism to this Jew from the east. His name was Paul, they whispered, from Tarsus. He has been invited here to tell us about this strange god he has been preaching these last few days in the marketplaces and the synagogues, the worship place of these Jews. And now he is here — at the *Areopagus* — our judicial court — as if he is on trial and must plead his case before us, as the god Ares did once for murder.

Some mocked his stunted appearance and unattractive physiognomy. Others laughed at his fanaticism and arrogance. After all, this was a city where truth and reason had enlightened the world. What does this Jew have to offer with this strange god? We have thousands of gods, they mused. We have the spirit of Socrates and of Pericles. What does this babbler have to offer us that we do not already have? And what is this that the gods do not need Temples and offerings? What is this blasphemy coming from the foul mouth of this unpolished foreigner with his strange Greek?

Yet a few were spellbound by his charisma, by his grace and devotion to his God. For his respect for the Athenians despite their thousands of idols. For he did not disparage or mock them but praised them for their sincere search for the truth. For their love of wisdom and knowledge. One of them was named Dionysius, an educated Athenian who breathed Greek literature and who had traversed great distances and foreign countries to seek philosophical and cosmological truths. He was fascinated by this man's conviction, in a god that was 'not far from each one of us. . .

A young Epicurean hissed angrily. 'What arrogance! How is he so sure that this god even exists? Does he exist in the way Zeus exists, or Athena or Artemis? And if he does exist, surely he does not concern himself with the trifles of mortal life.'

His fellow Epicureans agreed and looked with extreme haughtiness upon Paul. After all, what was this universe but atoms falling through space, bumping accidentally into each other, thus forming the universe around us? What are humans but a composition of atoms? The gods, if they did exist, were so utterly estranged from the world of man that the only thing that mattered was the pursuit of happiness and pleasure. Death was not to be feared nor was personal judgment.

Standing beside the Epicureans were their counterparts, the Stoics. They listened quietly and with interest, perplexed by this concept of a personal god who played an intimate role in the life of mortals. 'What god is this?' an elderly Stoic mumbled in amazement. For their god was but an abstract force that permeated the universe. They referred to this force by various names; Zeus, fire, Reason — sometimes even god. This god — this active principle in the universe — brought all existence together into an ordered and rational whole. In an endless cycle of repetition, where fire leads to the generation of the elements, which in turn leads to the created world as we know it, finally conflagrating back to fire. All was fixed, all was planned according to the great Logos (reason) behind creation and all would one day return to be engulfed by the living seed that was the basis of life.

Only through understanding the cause of nature through 'reason' could anything be understood, only through 'reason' could one find 'happiness'. But ultimately, things could not be changed, thus one had to accept one's fate and live a life of detachment and acceptance.

Yet here was this man talking of a God outside of creation. Yet at the same time playing an active role in a world that would not conflagrate thus leading to another cycle of life. He was professing a linear understanding of the world, where all had a beginning, middle and a purposeful end. Where salvation was possible and the futility of idols and temples was unnecessary. After all, the Stoics too condemned the Athenians love of statues and religious rituals.

For Athens was a city brimming with idols; thousands upon thousands of gods and goddesses congested the streets waiting to receive their votive offerings from the pious in return for blessing and well-being. This grieved Paul's spirit but as he was 'all things to all people'; he recognized the Athenians quest for spiritual fulfilment and truth because in spite of their illustrious temples and beautiful idols – their bloody sacrifices designed to appease their fickle gods – there stood an altar with the curious inscription: 'To an unknown God.'

It seemed strange to him that despite the Olympian and Asian deities worshipped by the people, they were still required to dedicate an altar to another god they had yet to discover. The Athenians' quest for knowledge astonished him and filled him with hope. Here are a people thirsting for the ultimate philosophical and spiritual truth. Overwhelmed by the Spirit moving within him, he continued. . .

For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Uproar soon followed.

'He's quoting our great poet Aratus. . .' one of the Stoics whelped, angry yet secretly impressed by Paul's knowledge of Greek truths.

'He accuses us of ignorance. . .! Athena, hear his cries of blasphemy and vindicate us.'

'What judgment is this? And by whom are we to be judged? Who is this man he is claiming has been raised from the dead? Sheer nonsense! Utter hogwash! What insolence. What arrogance. . .'

Loud muttering swept over the crowd as they droned together like a beehive, most mocking his claim of the resurrection from the dead, furious that this stranger could insult them and their beliefs with such impunity.

'And this salvation that he brings, this message that you preach, is it for all? For Jew and Greek, for slave and free, for man and woman?'

Silence rippled through the crowd and they turned and stared at Damaris. More renowned for her intelligence rather than her beauty, this wife of the noble Dionysius nonetheless possessed an enigmatic charisma that forced people to listen to her, despite the fact she belonged to the weaker sex.

The harsh sound of grumbling soon replaced silence as men, young and old, spoke against Damaris. Their voices billowing with hostility and in unison, ready to rush towards her and drown her.

'More insolence,' an elderly man grumbled in a raspy voice and in all his frailty as he stood hunchbacked and deformed. 'The world is coming to an end. Youth mocks elder, atheists mock the gods, woman mocks man. . . Does it never end?'

'The worlds gone mad!' another man with wild black hair growled as he glared at Paul who was now standing motionless.

'Let's listen to what he has to say,' an old lady whispered, her voice muffled by the chaos besieging her.

'She cursed him! He has been transformed into a statue!' another man laughed as many in the crowd scowled at Paul who stood as still as the idols he condemned. But within him was swirling such a rush of emotion, such adrenalin flowing through his entire being, he felt as if he would be overpowered by the words wanting to flood forth from his very soul.

Damaris ignored the crowds' mocking. She gazed at Paul with her deep-set eyes of raven black that were enclosed by heavy eyebrows. Her pale skin flushed a rose-red, her arms encircling her slim waist and clutching her soft tunic in eager agitation.

‘After all, I am familiar with the Hebrew God that you are preaching. Who has chosen the nation of Israel and given them the Commandments; this God who has neither shape nor form. But what does it *mean* to me as a daughter of the Hellenes when these same Hebrew men praise this God for not being a gentile, for not being a woman. And I am familiar with the prayers of these Greeks surrounding me, for they too thank their gods for having them born of the privileged male sex. What did this man say and do – this one that you claim was resurrected from the dead? How does he speak to me, how can *you* speak to me and my sisters who are despised and oppressed. . .?’

Damaris was renowned for her work amongst slave women and women condemned to the many brothels that scourged Athens. Renowned for her attempts to save young female babies exposed by their parents who saw no value in raising a girl in this society. Tossed onto garbage piles that existed everywhere in this town to die a cruel death, or to be snatched up by the seedy for exploitation. Incensed by a male arrogance that denied women their humanity in a world that saw maleness as the norm. That saw father and husband control a woman’s life from her birth till her death. That saw women as purely defined by their sex and whose only purpose was children or male pleasure.

All of this despite the veneration of the goddesses.

After all, did not the great philosopher Plato in his Republic acknowledge that the only difference between men and women was that the female bears and the male begets? And thus, women too could be philosophical rulers, could engage in the same roles in society as their male counterparts. Without this, no society could claim to be just. No society could claim to be from the one true God.

‘So, what do you say? Is there no ‘male or female’ as Damaris wants! Do you defy the natural law Paul?’ The rest of the crowd nodded their heads in agreement, roughly breathing in the repressive air.

‘All who are baptized in the name of Christ will be clothed with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. . .’

Paul stopped. He seemed to flinch as if in pain while he was waiting for Damaris to respond. He had struggled with this concept since the beginning of his mission; struggled with such a radical notion that united all of humanity into one. That made women equal to men. Was at first scandalized when he heard the Apostles retell Jesus’ encounter with women; he had healed many possessed by demons and with infirmities and even conversed with them in public. He taught them as if they were worthy of learning and had even allowed a woman to anoint his head in public – her symbolic act pointing to the kingship of Christ. Many followed him in his work and it was even told that women were the first to see the Resurrected Christ.

Paul’s world turned upside down. Could such anarchy – such radical equality be real in this fallen world? Was Christ the Adam before the fall, restoring the broken relationship between man and woman, a relationship characterised by dominance and oppression? Was it possible that this movement could transform society in such a way that Jews no longer saw themselves as ‘privileged and holy’, where masters no longer tyrannised over slaves, where women could minister, rule and labour alongside men as equal partners? A new world contrary to the laws of Rome itself? Contrary to his Jewish faith? Was his God merely the God of men, or had a paradigm shift in thinking taken place with the advent of Christ; that Christ – despite the historical limitations of his maleness, his Jewishness – was Wisdom

Incarnate preaching an inclusive and liberating message of hope and salvation. Breaking the cycle of rejection and despair that alienated humanity from their God.

It became clear to him that with the Death and Resurrection of Christ came the Reign of God on earth, the *eschaton* that inaugurated universal salvation as proclaimed by the Holy Scriptures. That restored a broken humanity.

The crowd began to disperse. They had enough of this scoffer, as many called him, this seed picker who, like a sparrow, picked up scraps of seeds and grain but could not offer anything of real substance. Certainly, in their eyes.

But Damaris, together with Dionysius and a handful remained. Damaris musing with intensity Paul's claim that in Christ there is no male or female. What did he mean by this, she wondered? Would this be merely a spiritual 'equality' or a concrete one? After all, she was sick of philosophical babblings that promised so much but offered little. She wanted substance, she wanted a transformed society, she wanted salvation.

As she listened to Paul speak till the early hours of the morning, she discovered a faith incredible to her. Where access to God was possible through his Spirit; of a Risen Lord whose presence was manifest through this same Spirit that endowed all with unique gifts for the edification of the community. Of a vision where injustice and suffering were overcome; of a new community united through the Death and Resurrection of Christ.

Damaris entered a new life that day. She was now clothed in Christ—a new creation infused with the Holy Spirit moving within her and illuminating her soul. Inspired by Jesus' encounter with women and the dream of a new world, she preached far and wide, together with her husband, bringing the fullness of the Kingdom and the birth of a new humanity.

