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Paul and Socrates in Dialogue: Points of Contact between the Areopagus Speech and the Apology*

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For many years, scholars have noted striking similarities between the account of Paul's visit to Athens in Acts and ancient accounts of the trial of Socrates. There have been at least five distinct proposals about the significance of these similarities, but each has substantial shortcomings. In this article, I argue that Luke's purpose is to place Paul's Areopagus speech in dialogue with the thought of Socrates as it is represented in traditions about his trial, especially Plato's *Euthyphro* and *Apology*.

Keywords: Acts of the Apostles, Areopagus, Paul, Socrates, philosophy, rhetoric, intertextuality

1. Introduction: Echoes of Socrates in Luke's Account of Paul's Visit to Athens

For many years, scholars studying Luke's account of Paul's visit to Athens in Acts 17 have noticed that aspects of this scene evoke the figure of Socrates. A wide variety of points of correspondence have been proposed, but there are three that frequently recur in the literature and appear to form the backbone for these proposals. First, Luke states that Paul spends much of his time in Athens at the marketplace (Acts 17.17), the very location where Socrates famously pestered the citizens of Athens. Second, Luke describes Paul's activity in Athens with the verb *διαλέγομαι* (Acts 17.17), which evokes Socrates' customary practice of engaging in dialogues. Third, Luke reports that some of the Athenians respond to Paul by suggesting that he is a 'preacher of foreign divinities' who brings a 'new

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teaching' and 'introduces foreign things' (Acts 17.18, 20), and many interpreters have here detected an allusion to the charges under which Socrates was condemned, particularly the claim that Socrates was guilty of 'introducing foreign gods' to Athens.¹ On the basis of these connections, there appears to be a broad consensus that, for those with ears to hear, Luke evokes the figure of Socrates in Acts 17.² There is far less agreement, however, over the purpose of these Socratic allusions. Hence, the aim of this article is to explore the significance of Luke's evocation of Socrates in his account of Paul's visit to Athens. We will first survey and evaluate the previous explanations for this phenomenon, and then argue for the new proposal that Luke's aim is to place Paul's speech in dialogue with the perspective of Socrates as it is represented in traditions about his trial.

2. Explaining the Echoes: The Virtues and Vices of Five Previous Proposals

Let us begin by examining the previous proposals. There are several points of overlap between the explanations for why Luke alludes to Socratic traditions in Acts 17, but they can basically be grouped into five categories. As we proceed

- 1 Cf. the chart of parallels to these phrases in Plato, *Apol.* 24b; *Euthyphr.* 2c-3c; Xenophon, *Apol.* 10; *Mem.* 1.1.1 in D. R. MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature* (The New Testament and Greek Literature 2; Lanham, MT: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014) 76-7.
- 2 Cf. B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (ASNU 21; Uppsala: Gleerup, 1955) 46; H. Conzelmann, 'The Address of Paul on the Areopagus', *Studies in Luke-Acts* (ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn; London: SPCK, 1966) 217-30, at 219; E. Plümacher, *Lukas als hellenistischer Schriftsteller: Studien zur Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972) 19; G. Schneider, 'Anknüpfung, Kontinuität, und Widerspruch in der Areopagrede Apg 17,22-31', *Kontinuität und Einheit: Für Franz Mußner* (ed. P.-G. Müller and W. Stenger; Freiburg: Herder, 1981) 173-8, at 174-5; K. O. Sandnes, 'Paul and Socrates: The Aim of Paul's Areopagus Speech', *JSNT* 50 (1993) 13-26, at 21-2; H.-J. Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000) 76; D. M. Reis, 'The Areopagus as Echo Chamber: *Mimesis* and Intertextuality in Acts 17', *JHC* 9 (2002) 259-77, at 268; D. Dormeyer, 'Weisheit und Philosophie in der Apostelgeschichte (Apg 6,1-8,1a und 17,16-34)', *Die Weisheit - Ursprünge und Rezeption: Festschrift für Karl Löning zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. M. Fassnacht, A. Leinhäupl-Wilke and S. Lücking; Münster: Aschendorff, 2003) 155-84, at 174; M.-F. Baslez, 'Un "nouveau Socrate" dans la tradition chrétienne', *MoBi hors-série* (printemps 2008) 22-5, at 22-4; A. A. Nagy, 'Comment rendre un culte juste au dieu inconnu? Le Socrate chrétien entre Lystre et Athènes', *KALENDAE: Studia sollemnia in memoriam Johannis Sarkady* (ed. G. Németh; Debrecen: University of Debrecen, 2008) 241-64, at 243; R. Dupertuis, 'Socratizing Paul: The Portrait of Paul in Acts', *The Fourth R* 22.6 (2009) 11-18, 28, at 12; R. I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 426-7; J. W. Jipp, 'Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16-34 as Both Critique and Propaganda', *JBL* 131 (2012) 567-88, at 570-1; D. Marguerat, *Paul in Acts and Paul in his Letters* (WUNT 310; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 70-1.

through these five proposals, we will note both the virtues and vices of each position.

First, some suggest that Luke's purpose in evoking Socrates is to suggest that Christianity has a legitimate claim to a place within the Greek cultural world.³ It is likely that this aim is one of Luke's goals in describing Paul's visit to Athens, but this view does little to explain why references to Socrates in particular are necessary. Having Paul speak in this major cultural centre and engage with the philosophers there makes this point by itself. Thus, although Luke probably is interested in using this scene to boost the cultural profile of the Christian movement, there is perhaps more that can be said about why Luke chooses to evoke Socrates.

A second proposal is that Luke is trying to elevate not the Christian movement as a whole but rather the status of Paul himself, and the Socratic echoes are meant to suggest that Paul is a new Socrates. This view is typically tied to the claim that Luke depicts Paul as a Socratic figure throughout the book of Acts.⁴ As with the first view, it seems that there is some truth in the claim that Luke seeks to elevate Paul's status by presenting him 'in Socratic garb';⁵ there is clearly some kind of comparison going on between the two. Nevertheless, upon close inspection, a number of the broader parallels that scholars have proposed between Paul and Socrates do not appear to be cases of intentional modelling on Luke's part.

Consider the basic list of commonalities that Loveday Alexander presents: she claims that both Socrates and Paul understand themselves to be on a divine mission, both claim to have personal divine guidance, both experience tribulations and persecutions, and both are put on trial, imprisoned and ultimately killed.⁶ Alexander concludes from these parallels that the life of Socrates was a 'particular template from the repertoire of Hellenistic philosophical biography which ... exert[ed] some influence on the structuring of Luke's Pauline narrative'.⁷ But none of the features of Paul's life that Alexander highlights are distinctively Socratic. In fact, the letters of Paul suggest that persecution, divine guidance

3 Pervo, *Acts*, 428–9; Plümacher, *Lukas als hellenistischer Schriftsteller*, 19, 97; Schneider, 'Anknüpfung, Kontinuität, und Widerspruch', 174–5.

4 Cf. L. Alexander, 'Acts and Ancient Intellectual Biography', *The Book of Acts in its Ancient Literary Settings* (BAFCS 1; ed. B. Winter and A. D. Clarke; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 31–63, at 57–63; Reis, 'Areopagus as Echo Chamber', 269–73; D. R. MacDonald, 'A Categorization of Antetextuality in the Gospels and Acts: A Case for Luke's Imitation of Plato and Xenophon to Depict Paul as a Christian Socrates', *The Intertextuality of the Epistles: Explorations of Theory and Practice* (ed. T. L. Brodie, D. R. MacDonald and S. Porter; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006) 211–25, at 217–25; Dupertuis, 'Socratizing Paul', 13–16; C. S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. III: 15:1–23:35 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014) 2603–7; MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil*, 76–81.

5 This phrase is borrowed from Dupertuis, 'Socratizing Paul', 12.

6 Alexander, 'Acts and Intellectual Biography', 58–63.

7 Alexander, 'Acts and Intellectual Biography', 57.

and belief that he was on a divine mission were important aspects of the historical Paul's life and even central features of his self-conception. Whatever one makes of the issue of Luke's access to Paul's letters, Luke's intention to describe the activities of this historical person explains the presence of this material quite well, and, consequently, the claim that Luke included these details because of a Socratic template appears unlikely.

The third view is that Luke's purpose is to indicate that the speech Paul gives will utilise rhetorical strategies that Socrates himself employed. There have been distinct proposals along these lines from Karl Olav Sandnes, Mark D. Given and Agnes Nagy.

Sandnes suggests that Paul, like Socrates, employs the rhetorical strategy of *insinuatio*, which involves using subtle speech that is intended to provoke interest in further teaching.⁸ The problem with this view is that *insinuatio* does not seem to be a rhetorical strategy that Socrates employed. As Socrates explains in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, his dialogues were not meant to provoke interest in a deeper teaching that he was keeping hidden from his interlocutors. His philosophical mission was, in fact, entirely deconstructive. Upon considering the Oracle of Delphi's proclamation that he was the wisest person on earth, Socrates decided that this meant that no one has wisdom and the only real wisdom is to realise that fact. Hence, the point of Socrates' dialogues was simply to show the folly of others' claims to wisdom by demonstrating the inner contradictions of their own views.⁹ The dialogues are elenctic, purely deconstructive, not a tantalising invitation to further instruction. Although Socrates attracted and retained students, this was not because his dialogues hinted at hidden truths to be unfolded later.

Given proposes that Paul's speech in Acts uses ambiguity and deception in imitation of Socrates, who often employed ambiguity and deception in his dialogues.¹⁰ Given is certainly right that Paul's speech contains a number of ambiguous terms, and he ably highlights how this stands at the root of the classic debate over

8 Sandnes, 'Paul and Socrates', 15–24.

9 Plato, *Apol.* 20c–24b; cf. J. A. Colaiaco, *Socrates against Athens: Philosophy on Trial* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 65–70; R. Bett, 'Socratic Ignorance', *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates* (ed. D. R. Morrison; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 217–25. Some contemporary scholars suggest that Socrates did have positive views that can be constructed through paying attention to his particular lines of argument, but this is highly debated; cf. M. L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 30–1. Regardless of the validity of this claim, Socrates himself presents his dialogues as purely deconstructive.

10 M. D. Given, 'The Unknown Paul: Philosophers and Sophists in Acts 17', in *Society of Biblical Literature 1996 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996) 343–51; *idem*, *Paul's True Rhetoric: Ambiguity, Cunning, and Deception in Greece and Rome* (Emory Studies in Early Christianity; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001) 68–74. Within the latter, Given positions his proposal as a supplement to the view that Paul is portrayed as a new Socrates more broadly in Acts (35).

whether the speech is in essence Jewish theology or Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, although Socrates does on occasion use subtle speech and wordplay in the dialogues, Given presents no evidence that this is a characteristic that was particularly associated with Socrates in the ancient world. In fact, he offers much better evidence that subtle speech involving double meanings was particularly associated with the Stoic school of philosophy,¹¹ and the explicit reference to the presence of Stoic philosophers in Acts 17.18 suggests that Paul's subtleties are much more likely to be understood as imitation of this school than as imitation of Socrates.

Nagy argues that the shape of the Areopagus speech as a whole mimics a Socratic dialogue because it begins with something familiar, appears to agree with the views of the audience early on, but then goes on to introduce doubts about their ideas.¹² This proposal, however, suffers from several shortcomings. One fairly obvious problem is that Paul's speech is not a dialogue; it is a monologue. If Luke had intended for readers to recognise the interaction between Paul and the Athenians as a Socratic dialogue, he could easily have written the scene differently. Furthermore, Nagy's description of the structure of a Socratic dialogue generalises the shape of these episodes to far too great a level of abstraction. For example, Nagy describes the opening of Socratic dialogues as beginning with something familiar, but what typically happens is that Socrates initiates a dialogue in the midst of a conversation by getting his interlocutors to provide a definition of some important term in an area for which they have claimed expert knowledge, and he then begins to highlight the problems with that definition through leading questions. That is a far cry from what happens in Acts 17.

In my estimation, the virtue of these rhetorical proposals is that they see the point of Luke's Socratic allusions as relating to Paul's speech. Unfortunately, their particular claims that Paul's speech employs the rhetorical techniques of Socrates all prove unpersuasive.

The fourth view is that Luke's purpose is to indicate that Paul, like Socrates, is actually on trial and in mortal danger.¹³ One of the primary strengths of this view

11 Cf. Given, 'Unknown Paul', 347–50.

12 Nagy, 'Comment rendre un culte juste', 253–5, 263–4; cf. Marguerat, *Paul in Acts*, 66–77, who essentially combines all three of these rhetorical views with the proposal that Luke portrays Paul as a new Socrates more broadly in Acts.

13 B. Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 515–17; C. K. Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 29–33, 38–9; *idem*, 'The Grammar of Life: The Areopagus Speech and Pagan Tradition', *NTS* 57 (2011) 31–50, at 38–9. There is also a softer version of this proposal that suggests that the Socratic echoes evoke an atmosphere of danger, although Paul is not really on trial; cf. E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 527–8; C. K. Rothschild, *Paul in Athens: The Popular Religious Context of Acts 17* (WUNT 341; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck,

is that it relates Luke's account to the narratives of Socrates' trial in particular, which is the specific scene evoked by the most explicit allusions. Hammering home this point, C. Kavin Rowe states that if this reading is incorrect, 'the allusions become pointless: why direct so carefully the auditors' attention to Socrates' trial if it is not mean to inform their understanding of Paul's situation in Athens?'¹⁴ This is strong rhetoric, but the claim that Paul is actually on trial under the same charges as Socrates has significant problems.

In the literary accounts of the charges against Socrates, the claim that Socrates introduced new gods is not presented as a distinct crime in its own right but instead consistently appears as a supplement to the charge that he denied or failed to honour the gods worshipped by the city. For example, Plato, *Apol.* 24b reports the charge as, 'Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young and does not acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges, but other newfangled divinities' (LCL).¹⁵ Introducing new gods is a crime here because it is a feature of Socrates' broader failure to uphold the city's traditional worship. Once this point is recognised, the claim that Luke is portraying Paul as facing the same charges as Socrates is cast in serious doubt. Paul's speech explicitly criticises Athens's traditional worship. If Paul is here facing the same charges as the Socrates of Plato or Xenophon, his speech suggests that he is guilty, and his release at the end of the episode makes little sense.

Furthermore, the claim that Paul is on trial is itself doubtful. The discussion of this issue is complicated and often includes a number of sub-questions,¹⁶ but the

2014) 59, although Rothschild ultimately decides that the point of the allusions is 'to recall the glory days of ancient Athens' (88).

¹⁴ Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 30.

¹⁵ Trans. C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy, eds., *Plato: Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo* (LCL 36; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). Cf. Plato, *Euthyphr.* 2c-3c; Xenophon, *Apol.* 10; *Mem.* 1.1.1; see also the discussions of the charges against Socrates in J. Beckman, *The Religious Dimension of Socrates' Thought* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1979) 55-7; McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 119-23, 133-5, 139-41; R. Parker, *Athenian Religion: A History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 216-17; Colaiaco, *Socrates against Athens*, 122-6.

¹⁶ E.g. does Luke present Paul as appearing before the Areopagus Council or speaking on the hill with this name? In favour of the hill, see É. Beurlier, 'Saint Paul et l'Aréopage', *Revue d'histoire et de littérature religieuses* 1 (1896) 344-66, at 352-3, 364-5; M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: SCM, 1956) 80-1; Klauck, *Magic and Paganism*, 79; Marguerat, *Paul in Acts*, 71; in favour of the council, see Gärtner, *Areopagus Speech*, 55-6; N. B. Stonehouse, *Paul before the Areopagus and Other New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 8-9; H. Külling, *Geoffenbartes Geheimnis: Eine Auslegung von Apostelgeschichte 17,16-34* (Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 79; Zurich: TVZ, 1993) 22-3; N. C. Croy, 'Hellenistic Philosophies and the Preaching of the Resurrection (Acts 17:18, 32)', *NovT* 39 (1997) 21-39, at 24-5; Jipp, 'Paul's Areopagus Speech', 573-4; Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 30-1; *idem*, 'Grammar of Life', 37.

central problems with this view are rooted in the narrative frame around Paul's speech.

Before the speech, the text does not present any legal procedures or the lodging of charges against Paul. When the Athenians bring Paul to the Areopagus in verses 19 and 20, they say, 'May we know (δυνάμεθα γνῶναι) what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.' Nothing about that gives the impression that Paul is facing a legal charge; it simply sounds as if the Athenians are curious about Paul's teaching. Rowe's attempt to expand δυνάμεθα γνῶναι so that the initial phrase reads 'we have the legal right to know' stretches these common words beyond what a reader could be expected to understand.¹⁷ Furthermore, in the following verse, Luke adds an authorial comment highlighting Athenian curiosity: 'Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new' (Acts 17.21). Rowe explains this as Luke's effort to highlight the hypocrisy of the Athenians in bringing charges against Paul,¹⁸ but it makes far more sense as an explanation for the Athenians' interest in Paul's 'new' message.¹⁹ Thus, Luke appears to preface the speech by depicting it as a response to Athenian curiosity, not legal complaints.²⁰

The same understanding makes good sense out of Luke's account of the response to Paul's speech. When Paul finishes, there is no verdict or legal decision of any kind; Luke simply reports, 'Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from their midst' (Acts 17.32–3). Rowe suggests that this conclusion can be read either 'as a statement that stems from aroused curiosity or as the decision on the part of some members of the Areopagus to postpone a verdict until the arrival of further clarification'.²¹ But this attempt to portray the conclusion to the episode as potentially legal in nature is undermined by the fact that Paul is

17 Cf. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 31; *idem*, 'Grammar of Life', 37. A similar interpretation of δύνανται γνῶναι is proposed by B. W. Winter, 'On Introducing Gods to Athens: An Alternative Reading of Acts 17:18–20', *TynBul* 47 (1996) 71–90, at 81–2, who claims that this means 'we possess the legal right to judge' (Winter is followed by Jipp, 'Paul's Areopagus Speech', 570), but Winter points only to *P.Oxy.* 899 l. 31 as evidence for this reading of δύνανται, and the line he cites does not require the meaning that he attributes to it.

18 Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 32–3.

19 Cf. P. Gray, 'Athenian Curiosity (Acts 17:21)', *NovT* 47 (2005) 109–16, at 110–13, who highlights the use of curiosity as a stereotypical vice of busybodies in Greco-Roman literature.

20 Cf. Baslez, 'Un "nouveau Socrate"', 24; Croy, 'Hellenistic Philosophies', 24; Klauck, *Magic and Paganism*, 79–80; Külling, *Geoffenbartes Geheimnis*, 22; Marguerat, *Paul in Acts*, 71; Sandnes, 'Paul and Socrates', 14–15.

21 Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 39.

not held in custody and makes no further appearances before this group of people.²²

Thus, the view that the Socratic echoes signal that Paul is on trial in Acts 17 falters for the simple reason that Paul is not portrayed as being on trial in this chapter.

Finally, the fifth view comes from a recent article by Torsten Jantsch, who suggests that Luke's purpose is to prepare readers for the ways in which Paul's speech carries forward Socrates' philosophical critique of Athenian religion. According to Jantsch, there are thematic correspondences between Paul and Socrates that demonstrate that the Christian message is the true heir not only of the prophetic hopes of Israel but also of the Greek philosophical tradition.²³ In my estimation, Jantsch is on the right track in proposing a connection between the speech and the thought of Socrates. The problem here, however, is that Jantsch mistakenly argues that Socrates actually opposed the Athenians' cultic honouring of the gods, and he consequently sees more continuity between Socrates and Paul than is actually there. Jantsch claims that Socrates opposed the cult on the basis of three factors: (1) statements in which Socrates emphasises the self-sufficiency of the gods, (2) questions that Socrates asks about what purpose sacrifices actually serve, and (3) Socrates' statement in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* that no one could ever thank god worthily.²⁴ Jantsch's reading of this material, however, conflicts with one of the main points that Xenophon makes within *Memorabilia*. One of Xenophon's central arguments is that the charge that Socrates did not believe in the gods of Athens is obviously false because Socrates himself was punctilious in observing sacrificial rites.²⁵ In fact, in one of the dialogues within that work, Socrates even attempts to convince an interlocutor that he is wrong to think that sacrifices to the gods are unnecessary.²⁶ Hence, Jantsch's reading of the particular statements that he highlights and his overall understanding of Socrates' views on cultic worship kick against the goads of *Memorabilia*'s primary rhetorical thrust. Although Socrates does not provide a positive rationale for participating in the cult and did even raise questions about the function of sacrifices, the view that he opposed cultic worship is unfounded.

22 Cf. Beurlier, 'Saint Paul et l'Aréopage', 357; Conzelmann, 'Address of Paul', 219; Dibelius, *Studies in Acts*, 67–9; Gärtner, *Areopagus Speech*, 65.

23 T. Jantsch, 'Sokratische' Themen in der Areopagrede: Apg 17,22–31 im Kontext der antiken Philosophiegeschichte', *EC* 8 (2017) 481–503.

24 Jantsch, 'Sokratische' Themen', 498–502; for these points, Jantsch cites Plato, *Euthyphr.* 6b–c, 12e, 13a–c, 14c–15c; Xenophon, *Mem.* 4.3.15–4.3.18.

25 Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.1.2; cf. Beckman, *Religious Dimension*, 58; McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 159.

26 Socrates' dialogue with Aristodemus recounted in Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.4; cf. Nagy, 'Comment rendre un culte juste', 256–63.

3. Extending the Echoes: Paul's Speech and the Theology of Socrates in the Trial Traditions

If, then, these five previous proposals all have shortcomings in some regard, what is the purpose of Luke's Socratic allusions? Perhaps the simplest way to explain my proposal is that Luke appears to be doing the same thing with Socrates that he does with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers mentioned in Acts 17.18. Interpreters have for many years taken Luke's reference to these philosophical schools as a signal that the speech that follows interacts with their thought.²⁷ What I am proposing is that the echoes of Socrates in the episode leading up to the speech essentially perform the same function. They are meant to indicate that the speech interacts with the thought of Socrates.

This is, of course, similar to the proposal of Torsten Jantsch, but there are two main differences between this proposal and that of Jantsch. First, Jantsch sees Paul as building on Socrates' thought, but my proposal suggests a more complex interaction that involves both agreement and disagreement at different points. Second, Jantsch claims that Paul's speech interacts with a variety of statements from a number of sources about Socrates, but I think that Luke has in mind the traditions surrounding the trial of Socrates. Specifically, I think that Paul's speech implicitly interacts with Plato's dialogues *Euthyphro* and *Apology*. These two works are the core of Plato's account of Socrates' trial; *Euthyphro* is a dialogue that is set just before Socrates' preliminary hearing and deals with the meaning of the term 'piety', while *Apology* contains Socrates' defence speech during the trial and a few further interactions with the jury after the guilty verdict.

Luke appears to have in mind these specific dialogues for three reasons. First, as noted in the introduction to this article, the clearest verbal allusions in the passage are to the charge from the trial that Socrates is guilty of introducing foreign gods to Athens. Second, Luke has already made an allusion to Plato's *Apology* in Acts 5.29. There, Peter and the apostles proclaim that they will not give up preaching Jesus when they are released because, 'We must obey God rather than men.' As many have noted, this passage echoes Socrates' explanation to the jury in *Apology* 29d that he will not stop teaching philosophy if he is

27 Cf. the examinations (and widely varying evaluations) of the interaction between Paul's speech and these philosophies in Gärtner, *Areopagus Speech*, 66–169; E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1956) 31–56; P. Vielhauer, 'On the "Paulinism" of Acts', *Studies in Luke-Acts* (ed. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn; London: SPCK, 1966) 34–7; Dibelius, *Studies in Acts*, 27–58; Schneider, 'Anknüpfung, Kontinuität, und Widerspruch', 177–8; Dormeyer, 'Weisheit und Philosophie', 176–7; Rowe, 'Grammar of Life', 42–50; Jipp, 'Paul's Areopagus Speech', 579–82; S. Vollenweider, "'Mitten auf dem Areopag". Überlegungen zu den Schnittstellen zwischen antiker Philosophie und Neuem Testament', *EC* 3 (2012) 296–320; contra Rothschild, *Paul in Athens*, 5, who claims that Luke does not intend any 'meaningful engagement' with these schools in Paul's speech because their presence in the Agora is an 'inaccurate stereotype'.

released because, 'I shall obey God rather than you'.²⁸ Thus, Luke appears to have direct familiarity with Plato's accounts of Socrates' trial. Third, Paul's speech actually has some very interesting connections to the themes of these specific works. So, without further ado, let us examine the ways in which Paul's Areopagus speech interacts with Socrates' thought as it is presented in Plato's *Euthyphro* and *Apology*.

Paul's speech begins with a theme that was central to Socrates' philosophical project: the lack of true knowledge. As we have seen, in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates explains his philosophical mission to be one of exposing those with pretensions to wisdom as in reality unwise. Socrates' claim is not that he knew anything important but rather that those who claimed to have knowledge in reality did not.²⁹ In the dialogue with *Euthyphro*, we see the application of this idea to a theological question – the meaning of piety – and Socrates there expresses a large measure of agnosticism about the gods. He says, 'Is not this, Euthyphro, the reason why I am being prosecuted, because when people tell such stories about the gods I find it hard to accept them ... what am I to say, who confess frankly that I know nothing about them?'³⁰

At the beginning of Paul's speech in Acts 17, Paul strikes a Socratic pose by exposing the Athenians' lack of knowledge about God.³¹ Paul states, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: "To the unknown god." What therefore you worship without knowing, this I proclaim to you' (Acts 17.22–4). Unfortunately, this passage is typically misread in a way that minimises Paul's exposure of the Athenian's lack of religious knowledge. The central mistake is that most interpreters think that Paul here directly identifies the God that he proclaims with the unknown god worshipped at Athens. But a close examination of the passage does not bear this out. When Paul says, 'What therefore you worship without knowing', he uses a neuter relative pronoun. If he had intended to identify the God he proclaims with the unknown god, we would have expected him to use a masculine relative

28 Trans. Emlyn-Jones and Preddy (LCL 36). Cf. Plümacher, *Lukas als hellenistischer Schriftsteller*, 18–19; Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 197; C. S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. II: 3:1–14:28 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013) 1218.

29 Plato, *Apol.* 20c–24b; cf. the discussions of the theme of ignorance in Socrates' philosophy in Colaïaco, *Socrates against Athens*, 65–70; R. Bett, 'Socratic Ignorance', *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates* (ed. D. R. Morrison; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 215–36.

30 Plato, *Euthyphr.* 6a–b (trans. Emlyn-Jones and Preddy, LCL 36); cf. the discussions of this passage in McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 37–8; L. Fallis, *Socrates and Divine Revelation* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018) 52–3.

31 This similarity is also noted in Nagy, 'Comment rendre un culte juste', 248–9; Marguerat, *Paul in Acts*, 72.

pronoun in order to match the gender of the word θεός (God). The fact that he uses a neuter pronoun instead probably indicates that he is not speaking about the unknown god in particular but rather the entirety of the Athenians' religious system.³² Paul is saying that what the Athenians worship, their entire conception of the divine, they worship ἄγνοοῦντες, without knowledge or ignorantly, and his appeal to the altar to the unknown god is an effort to highlight that their own objects of worship testify to their lack of true religious knowledge. That is why, towards the end of the speech, Paul summarises the previous eras of Athenian religious life as 'times of ignorance' (χρόνους τῆς ἀγνοίας).³³

Nevertheless, unlike Socrates, Paul does not point out the Athenians' ignorance about the divine in order to claim that no knowledge is possible in this arena; his charge of ignorance is an effort to clear the deck for his own positive teaching about God. Paul's speech is not merely deconstructive elenctic reasoning; it is instructive kerygmatic proclamation. And his instruction has further points of contact with Plato's traditions about Socrates' trial.

As others have noted,³⁴ Paul's speech echoes Socrates' dialogue with Euthyphro when he claims that God does not need anything from humans. Towards the end of *Euthyphro*, Socrates discusses the final definition that Euthyphro proposes for the term piety, and takes issue with the fact that Euthyphro describes the relation between humans and the gods with the term 'service' (θεραπεία).³⁵ Towards the end, Euthyphro proposes the view that human service through prayer and sacrifice is some kind of barter with the gods. Socrates responds, 'Tell me, what advantage accrues to the gods from the gifts they get from us? For everybody knows what they give, since we have nothing good which they do not give. But what advantage do they derive from what they get from us?'³⁶ The correspondence between this statement and Acts 17.25 is striking. Paul says, 'nor is [God] served (θεραπείεται) by human

32 Those who have paid attention to this detail have often suggested that Paul's intention is to create distance between the conception of God held by his audience and his own more 'personal' understanding of God (e.g. Schneider, 'Anknüpfung, Kontinuität, und Widerspruch', 174–5; Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 524; Klauck, *Magic and Paganism*, 83), but that is far too complicated a distinction to be communicated through a mismatched relative pronoun.

33 Cf. Külling, *Geoffenbartes Geheimnis*, 29; Gärtner, *Areopagus Speech*, 238–9; J. A. Cowan, *The Writings of Luke and the Jewish Roots the Christian Way: An Examination of the Aims of the First Christian Historian in the Light of Ancient Politics, Ethnography, and Historiography* (LNTS 599; London: T&T Clark, 2019) 126–8.

34 E.g. Nagy, 'Comment rendre un culte juste', 256–63; Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 34–5; Jantsch, "'Sokratische" Themen', 490–500.

35 Plato, *Euthyphr.* 12e–13a.

36 Plato, *Euthyphr.* 14e–15a (trans. Emlyn-Jones and Preddy, LCL 36); cf. the discussion of this passage in Beckman, *Religious Dimension*, 50–3; McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 52–3; Fallis, *Socrates and Divine Revelation*, 70–9.

hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all humankind life and breath and everything'. Nevertheless, Paul again takes the point in a different direction from Socrates. Despite Socrates' participation in the cultic rites of Athens, he does not present any positive understanding of human service to the gods to counter Euthyphro's proposals; he simply shows why he thinks that Euthyphro's reflections collapse under their own weight. Paul, on the other hand, builds from this point in order to suggest that the Athenian worship of idols is entirely misguided and the true God is now calling them to repent of their ignorant worship.³⁷

The conclusion of Paul's speech also appears to interact with the Socratic material. At the end of Plato's *Apology*, Socrates discusses his impending death, and he surmises that death must be a good thing because his *daimonion*, the spirit that warned him about wrong actions, did not prevent him from saying the things that led to his condemnation.³⁸ Earlier in the speech, however, Socrates states that neither he nor anyone else actually knows what happens after death,³⁹ and, despite the speculation in parts of his speech to the jury, the dialogue ends on a similar agnostic note. Socrates tells the jurors, 'I go to die, and you to live; but which of us goes to the better lot, is known to none but God.'⁴⁰ Paul's speech similarly concludes by considering the ultimate fate of humans,⁴¹ but he does not share Socrates' agnosticism. According to Paul, '[God] commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this one he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17.30-1). Thus, Paul is confident that he knows the fate of

37 Cf. Gärtner, *Areopagus Speech*, 203, 236-7; Stonehouse, *Paul before the Areopagus*, 18-23; Jipp, 'Areopagus Speech', 586-7; Külling, *Geoffenbartes Gemeinmis*, 147-9; Rowe, 'Grammar of Life', 45; contra Dibelius, *Studies in Acts*, 65-6, who claims that there is a disjunction between the narrative and the speech with respect to the level of disapproval of idols.

38 Plato, *Apol.* 40c. For a variety of perspectives on Socrates' *daimonion*, see the essays in *Socrates' Divine Sign: Religion, Practice, and Value in Socratic Philosophy* (ed. P. Destrée and N. D. Smith; Kelowna: APP, 2005).

39 Plato, *Apol.* 29a-b.

40 Plato, *Apol.* 42a (trans. Emlyn-Jones and Preddy, LCL 36); cf. the comments on Socrates' agnosticism about the afterlife in *Apology* in Beckman, *Religious Dimension*, 25-6, 74; McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 252-7; M. Narcy, 'Socrates Sentenced by his Daimōn', *Socrates' Divine Sign*, 123.

41 This similarity of topic at the end of both speeches is also noted by Dupertuis, 'Socratizing Paul', 13; MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil*, 80-1, but they both wrongly count the theme of 'judgement' as a point of commonality. Socrates' speech does mention judgement, but he has in view the just order of the afterlife, not judgement of one's former life; cf. Beckman, *Religious Dimension*, 27; McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 269.

humans: all will be judged. He asserts that he is confident that this is true knowledge because God has given proof by raising the judge from the dead.⁴²

Here we see the fundamental difference between Socrates and Paul. The mission of Plato's Socrates is driven by philosophical reason and he believes that there is little that we can know about the gods. Paul's mission in Acts, however, is driven by his belief that God has revealed himself through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Paul of the Areopagus speech agrees with Socrates that human reflection about the gods is a vain project; it only leads to the conception of the divinity as being 'like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man' (Acts 17.29). Paul, however, does not stop with this negative result because he believes that God has given proof of his true nature by raising Jesus from the dead. That is why, in the view of the Paul of Acts, one need not stop with the proclamation that humans worship that which they do not know. God has taken humanity beyond what can be reached through philosophy by revealing himself in history.

4. Conclusion: The Areopagus Speech and the Apology in Dialogue

In conclusion, then, there is a strong case for the view that the Socratic echoes in Acts 17 are meant to invite readers to relate Paul's Areopagus speech to Socrates' philosophy of the divine, particularly as it is represented in Plato's dialogues *Euthyphro* and *Apology*. This reading of the Socratic allusions gives them a parallel function to Luke's reference to the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in Acts 17.18, and, as is the case with those philosophical schools, this proposal is borne out by the points of contact that emerge when Paul's speech is read in relation to the traditions about Socrates' trial. Luke's Paul appears to build on, but also contradict and go far beyond, the great Athenian philosopher. He exposes Athenian ignorance and reflects on the shortcomings of Athens' cultic worship in a manner reminiscent of Socrates, but he then proceeds to proclaim a message that depends not merely on philosophical reflection but also on a recent event in history through which, he believes, the God whom the Athenians have been groping to find has made himself and his purposes known. Luke's Paul thus engages with Socrates' thought in significant ways, demonstrating his own philosophical prowess while illustrating both the philosophical viability and the unique historical orientation of Christian faith.

42 On the speech's use of resurrection as the warrant for its claims about the judgement of idolatry, see Külling, *Geoffenbartes Geheimnis*, 154–9; O. Padilla, *The Acts of the Apostles: Interpretation, History and Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016) 232–3.