

# Epimenides: To the Unknown God

Paul was quoting a philosopher called Epimenides who, paradoxically, was himself a Cretan. The paradox is; Does this make him a liar, in which case what he says is untrue and Cretans are truthful? But as he is a Cretan it also makes what he says truthful. This is what is known in philosophic circles as the Epimenides Paradox.

## **But what do we know about Epimenides?**

Like so much of Greek ancient history his story is shrouded in legend and myth and it is impossible to glean what is fact and what is tradition.

The following is based upon an account recorded as history by Diogenes Laertius in the third century AD His story is interesting insofar as it throws light on Paul's visit to Athens recorded in Acts 17.

Epimenides was a 6th Century BC philosopher and religious prophet and a contemporary of more famous philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, who also refer to him in their writings.

Athens was the subject of a terrible plague and the city elders were at a loss to know how to abate it. They believed the city was under a curse because they were guilty of treachery against the followers of Cylon (the real one who had sought to overthrow the Athenians; nothing to do with the fictional starship Galactica!) who were slayed after they had been promised an amnesty. They had tried sacrificial offerings but to no avail.

Turning to the Oracle for wisdom, the priestess said there was another god who remained unappeased for their treachery. Who was this unknown god? The priestess did not know but advised that they should send a ship to the island of Crete and fetch a man called Epimenides who would know how to appease the offended god.

Athens was already known as the city of philosophers but what amazed Epimenides as he arrived in Athens from Piraeus was that the approach road was lined with the images of many gods; gods in their hundreds collected from the theologies of the peoples surrounding them.

**Epimenides postulated that indeed there must still be a god unknown to them great enough and good enough to do something about the plague if they invoked his help.** But, the elders questioned, how could they call upon a god whose name is unknown?

Epimenides responded **any god good and great enough to do something about the plague is probable also great and good enough to smile on their ignorance if they acknowledged their ignorance and called upon him.**

Epimenides advised the elders to seek a sign from the unknown god. He told them to graze a flock of healthy sheep of different colours, some white, some black on the grassy slope of Mars Hill. He then prayed something on the lines of...

*"O thou unknown god! Behold the plague afflicting the city. And if indeed you feel compassion to forgive and help us, behold the flock of sheep. Reveal your willingness to respond, I plead, by causing any sheep that pleases you to lie upon the grass instead of grazing. Choose white if white pleases; black if black delights. And those you choose we sacrifice to you –*

*acknowledging our pitiful ignorance of your name”*

Although it was early morning when the sheep were at their hungriest and therefore unlikely to stop grazing, before long some sheep settled down to rest and these were separated from the remainder of the flock for the sacrificial offering.

Epimenides ordered stonemasons to construct altars on each animal’s resting place. On each, following Epimenides’ instructions, they inscribed the words “agnosto theo” meaning “to an unknown god”.

**Within a week, the Athenians stricken by the plague recovered.**

Fast forward now to Paul’s visit to Athens in the first century AD recorded in Acts 17 Here we read...

*“While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and also in the marketplace...”*

His argument was with the philosophers (v.18) They heard Paul speak of Theos – God, which was a term familiar to them. It was commonly used as a general term for any deity, not a personal name.

But as philosophers they would have known that Xenophanes, Plato and Aristotle, three of the greatest philosophers of all time, used Theos as a personal name for one Supreme God in their writings, far above all other gods.

But how could Paul persuade Athenians who believed passionately in polytheism to acknowledge that there is only one true God? Note how he does this in v22 onwards...Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said;

“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..”

Paul announced what had waited six centuries for utterance. Yahweh, the Judeo-Christian God, was anticipated by Epimenides’ altar to the unknown god. He was not a “foreign god” as his adversaries claimed (v.18) but a God who had already intervened to bring help in the affairs of Athens.

The Cretan, Epimenides, therefore gave Paul the opening he needed to present the gospel to the Athenians. Perhaps he also continues to speak down the centuries to anyone who senses there is a loving, creator God who can smile on our ignorance and reach out to anyone who seeks Him.

<http://christiansincrete.org/news/to-an-unknown-god/>

## **Epimenides and the Restored Altar**

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To An Unknown God. Acts 17:22

Professionals’ face the task in every era to communicate properly about the truth of their generation and Paul’s mission was no different as he addressed the men of Athens. Paul was an active educator as he was well read. Paul was using their own history to relate to them about the one true God in the midst of a culture that had gone polytheistic. Paul was reaching back in history recalling the writings of Laertius Diogenes, a Greek cynic philosopher author of the third century A.D., in a classical work called *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.

The story that is related to this “Unknown God” in the Biblical account by Paul addressing the Greeks on Mars Hill happened 100 years before in Athens. Here is an account of this story. An Athenian aristocrat by the name of Nicias was an Athenian politician and general during the period of the Peloponnesian War. Nicias was a member of the Athenian politico. Here is an account of what is commonly called, by modern anthropologists “Sky-God” giving evidence to a pagan culture of a supreme God.

And when he was recognized (Epimenides) he was considered by the Greeks as a person especially beloved by the gods, on which account when the Athenians were afflicted by a plague, and the priestess at Delphi enjoined them to purify their city; they sent a ship and Nicias the son of Niceratus to Crete, to invite Epimenides to Athens; and he, coming there in the forty-sixth Olympiad, purified the city and eradicated the plague for that time; he took some black sheep and some white ones and led them up to the Areopagus, and from thence he let them go wherever they chose, having ordered the attendants to follow them, and wherever any one of them lay down they were to sacrifice him to the God who was the patron of the spot, and so the evil has stayed; and owing to this one may even now find in the different boroughs of the Athenians altars without names, which are a sort of memorial of the propitiation of the Gods that then took place.

There were many such altars built that day by the masons, and an inscription was placed on the side of them that read agnosto theo—to an unknown god. The monuments were soon lost from the years of weathering and the forgetfulness of the Athenians, except one. Years later, an Athenian recalled the altars of the unknown god from Epimenides prophecy and set in search of them to save them as a tribute to this unknown god. However, he only found one worth keeping, and he had it restored.

This is the altar that Paul is describing to the Mars Hill philosophers as the One True God. Paul was using Theos as a personal pronoun and not as a general term that Athenians utilized it impersonally about a god. However, these Athenian Aristocrats’ must have known that their own great philosophers’ such as Aristotle, Plato and Xenophanes used Theos as a personal Supreme God. God in His infinite wisdom has put in every culture the sign of an ultimate God.

<http://www.lifespringschristianchurch.org/articles/medicine-for-the-soul/item/1344-anthropological-sky-god-part-one>