The Dramatic Account of Paul’s Encounter with Philosophy

The object of this study is the pericope of Acts in which the apostle Paul visits the city of Athens and delivers a speech to the Stoic and the Epicurean philosophers on the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34). As in many other episodes of Acts, the narration is vivid and colorful. This dissertation examines Acts 17:16-34 as a dramatic episode, focusing on how the colorful and detailed narration of events produces “theses and programs” which were socially and ideologically relevant in the environment in which Acts was created and first used.

A large part of this study consists in relating the Athens episode to the context of ancient philosophical debates on gods. The important parallel texts to Acts 17:16-34 are Cicero’s De Natura Deorum, Plutarch’s collection of Moralia, and the works of Josephus. All of these contain stereotypical references to the Stoics’ and the Epicureans’ religious views. It is probable that this is precisely the kind of simple and stereotyped knowledge that Acts presupposes from its readers in philosophical and cultural matters.

The text’s literary strategy becomes clear in light of parallel material. Through the description of what happens to the historical persons and avoiding direct theoretical statements, the narrative puts forward a thesis according to which Christianity should be seen as a continuation of the good Stoic tradition; Epicureanism and Christianity, on the other hand, are remote to one another. This thesis certainly had political significance as well, as Stoicism was the dominant philosophical current of the time, whereas the Epicureans were often accused of atheism. A concrete issue related to the political significance of religion was worship, and it is indeed central to the passage of Acts 17:16-34. The author aims to demonstrate that the Christian abstinence from cult is in accordance with the best traditions of philosophy, and it is actually the Stoics and the Epicureans who are inconsistent on the issue.

ISBN 952-91-7747-X

Yliopistopaino
Helsinki 2004