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ACTS 17:27-29 EXPLAINED

It has been stated that Acts 17:28 is a reference to God's nature, when it says: "in Him we live and move and have our being". Is this claim correct? Let's examine this Scripture carefully.

For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said,
For we are also his offspring. (Acts 17:28)

Let's start by looking at THE CONTEXT of this statement.

In Verse 23 Paul introduces "THE UNKNOWN GOD".

For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE
UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. (Acts 17:23)

In Verse 24 God is shown as the Creator of an ordered universe and all the details in it. He owns it all and does not live in temples, as the Greeks thought.

God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth,
dwelleth not in temples made with hands; (Acts 17:24)

In Verse 25 Paul shows God is not worshipped by the idols (made by man's hands) or that He needs any offerings. God is shown as THE SOURCE OF ALL LIFE.

Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all
life, and breath, and all things; (Acts 17:25)

In Verse 26 God is revealed as the Creator of ALL MANKIND, a logical follow-up to verses 24-25.

And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath
determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; (Acts 17:26)

In Verse 27 Paul explains THE REAL PURPOSE OF LIFE, which is to seek contact with God.

That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not
far from every one of us: (Acts 17:27)

In Verse 28 Paul repeats the point he made in verse 25, that God is the Source of all life, and Paul does this by quoting two Greek poets, Aratus and Cleanthes.

For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said,
For we are also his offspring. (Acts 17:28)

In Verse 29 Paul now presents his conclusion: that God's divine nature is not physical.

Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like
unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. (Acts 17:29)

Let's now take a closer look at verse 27:

That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not
far from every one of us: (Acts 17:27)

The first part ("that they should seek the Lord") is a positive statement of the purpose of human life. The verb is in the present tense, active voice and infinitive mood.

The next part ("if haply they might feel after him and find him") expresses as wish. Both verbs are in the aorist tenses, which are independent of past, present or future. And both verbs are in the active voice and the optative mood. This "optative mood" is a way of expressing a wish or desire for an action to occur in which the completion of such is doubtful! [This tense is not used in modern Greek.]

That is very telling, isn't it? God DESIRES for mankind to seek contact with Him ... but it is doubtful that people will actually do so!

The last part of this verse ("though he be not far from every one of us") is a statement of fact, that contact with God can readily be established by a repentant person. God is not far from us.

Paul's intent is not to show that God is "near" in a geographic way. In 2 Corinthians 12:2 Paul implies God is up in the third heaven. So here in Acts 17 Paul's whole point is: THERE IS AN EASY WAY TO ESTABLISH CONTACT WITH GOD! He explains this in the next verse.

For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said,
For we are also his offspring. (Acts 17:28)

Let's examine the first part: "for in him we live, and move, and have our being". The Greek phrase reads (transliterated): "en auto gar zomen kai kinoumetha kai esmen".

The three verbs are in the present tense and in the indicative mood; i.e. they are statements of fact. The verb "esmen" is the first person plural of the verb "to be". So these three verbs say: "we live and move and are (i.e. exist)".

Let's look at the preposition "en", which is here translated as "in". "En" is used 2782 times in the N.T. ... thus it is very common indeed. In "THAYER'S GREEK-ENGLISH LEXICON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT" seven full columns of very small print are devoted to this word.

It has a range of uses and in English means: IN, ON, AT, WITH, BY, AMONG.

The preposition "en" is used often in the classics and also in the N.T. with the dative case of a person to mean: WITH, AMONG, IN THE PRESENCE OF. Some N.T. examples of how "en" is translated in such

situations are:

1 Corinthians 2:6 = AMONG in the expression "AMONG them that are perfect"

1 Corinthians 6:2 = BY in the expression "if the world shall be judged BY you"

1 Corinthians 14:11 = UNTO in the expression "shall be a barbarian UNTO me"

Matthew 21:42 = IN in the expression "it is marvellous IN our eyes"

Matthew 1:23 = WITH in the expression "God WITH us"

Matthew 22:37 = 3x WITH in the expression "WITH all your heart/soul/mind"

Matthew 25:16 = WITH in the expression "traded WITH the same"

Matthew 26:52 = WITH in the expression "shall perish WITH the sword"

Mark 5:2 = WITH in the expression "a man WITH an unclean spirit"

Mark 9:50 = WITH in the expression "have peace one WITH another"

Acts 2:29 = WITH in the expression "his sepulchre is WITH us unto this day"

Romans 16:16 = WITH in the expression "Salute one another WITH an holy kiss"

So let's now go back to the first part of Acts 17:28.

The poet Aratus of Soli in Cicilia had around 270 B.C. written a work entitled "TA PHAINOMENA" and in this he had written (referring to the pagan god Jupiter): "for in him we live and move and have our being (i.e. exist)" ... and these are the words Paul now quotes in reference to the true God.

The poet Aratus had meant:

"WITH Jupiter we live and move and have our being". Aratus did not mean "IN Jupiter we live and move and have our being". Paul in quoting Aratus had the same meaning for the preposition "en" ... that God CONTROLS our lives and movements and very being. Paul showed that Aratus had said the same thing that Paul had said in verse 25.

Paul's point is that since God is so INTIMATELY INVOLVED with us, His creation, therefore it should not be a surprise that God has established a way for us to have contact with Him.

The last part of verse 28 ("for we are also his offspring") reads in the transliterated Greek "tou gar kai genos esmen". The Stoic philosopher Cleanthes (around 300-220 B.C.) had used a very similar phrase in a hymn to Jupiter (or Zeus). He had used the phrase: "ek sou gar genos esmen".

This is what Paul referred to in this last part of this verse. Again, Paul uses the poet's words to refer to the true God.

The word translated "offspring" is "genos" and this is also rather interesting. It is used 21 times in the N.T. and is also translated as: nation, kindred, stock, kind, generation. Its main meaning is generally considered to be "a race" or "a kind". Thus the last part of this verse could also be correctly translated as

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"for we are also his race, kind, stock, or kindred".

Some of these English words may here be more appropriate than others. But Paul used this quotation to refer to the human potential of becoming sons of God.

Let's look again at verse 29:

Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. (Acts 17:29)

GENOS OUN HUPARCHONTES TOU THEOU ouk opheilomen nomizein chruso he arguro he litho charagmati technes kai enthumeseos anthropou to THEION einai homion (Acts 17:29)

The phrase "genos oun huparchontes tou theou" means: "therefore being the race or kind or kindred or stock or offspring of God".

In this verse the English word "Godhead" is a translation of the Greek ADJECTIVE "theios", which had been used since the time of Homer to mean: the divine nature, power and providence of deity. And so Moffatt, for example, translates this word correctly as "divine nature".

Having presented two quotations from Greek poets that his audience would very likely have been familiar with, Paul now draws a logical conclusion: God is not physical and we cannot (and should not even try to!) present His divine nature in physical terms. That is all Paul is trying to convey in this verse.

TO SUMMARIZE THIS PASSAGE:

A careful examination of the whole passage makes clear that verse 28 ("... in him we live and move and have our being") is not a reference about the nature of God at all. Paul was quoting a pagan poet to make the point to his pagan audience that God is the source of all life, the Life-Giver! The Greek word "en" should certainly not be construed to mean "WITHIN (God)".

Furthermore, in verse 29 Paul shows our human potential ... to become "THE GOD KIND"! We human beings are the offspring or the race of God, made in God's image and likeness! In this life we are still of a different composition from God; we are physical and God is spirit. But in the resurrection we too will become spirit beings with spiritual bodies.

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and THERE IS A SPIRITUAL BODY. (1 Corinthians 15:44)

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