

# Word Study **Babbler**

Ian Davidson (Motherwell)

Ancient Athens was the centre of philosophy in Greece. The city was the home or the adopted home of such famous philosophers as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno. The city was also known for its unsurpassed sculpture, literature and oratory. The apostle Paul visited Athens during his second missionary journey. "In fame it was long past its meridian when Paul visited it. There was little of grandeur except its sculpture. Even that had been marred." (Alexander Brown)

Paul encountered the Stoics and the Epicureans in Athens. We read of his visit in Acts 17. Stoicism and Epicureanism were outstanding in importance and influence in the ancient world. The Epicureans were the earliest scientific and liberal humanists. The Stoics "sought salvation in aligning the will with the inherent Reason of the universe, Logos." (New Bible Dictionary). "While Stoicism at its best was marked by a great moral earnestness and a high sense of duty, it was marked also by a spiritual pride quite foreign to the spirit of Christianity." (F.F. Bruce). We should not underestimate the influence of both these philosophies. Stoicism, for example, continued as an organized movement for some five hundred years. Famous Stoics included Seneca and the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, author of *Meditations*.

We read in Acts 17:18, **"Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoics, encountered Paul. And some said, 'What will this babbler say? Others, he seems to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection."** Obviously, Paul's opponents thought that Jesus and the *Anastasis* (the Greek word for resurrection) were gods, Jesus being the male god and Anastasis, the female god(dess). To them, the former might well have stood for 'healing' and the latter 'restoration'.

The translators of the Authorised Version chose the word 'babble' to translate the Greek term *spermologos*. The English word itself is interesting in that it is probably from the infantile *ba, ba* and, perhaps, affected in some sense by Babel. The Tower of Babel is where the confusion of tongues took place (Genesis 11). There the people wanted to stay together, but God wanted them to be scattered over the face of the whole earth. To achieve this end, He confused their language so that they could not understand one another. It's a strange thing. When God wants people to be scattered abroad, they want to be together. When God wants His people to be together in Christ Jesus, they prefer to be divided and scattered abroad. Jesus has revealed that the salvation of the world hinges upon the unity of all believers (John 17). This is a huge lesson for all saints everywhere.

*Spermologos* has been variously translated as 'babblers', 'picker of scraps', 'chatterbox', 'charlatan', and 'ignorant show-off' to name a few. Vine writes of *spermologos*, "Primarily an adjective, it came to be used as a noun signifying a crow or some other bird picking up seeds (*sperma*, a seed, *lego*, to collect). Then it seems to have been used of a man accustomed to hang about the streets and markets, picking up scraps that fall from loads; hence a parasite, who lives at the expense of others, a hanger on. Metaphorically, it became used of a man who picks up scraps of information and retails them secondhand, a plagiarist, or of those who make a show, in unscientific style, of knowledge obtained from misunderstanding of lectures." Prof. Ramsay points out that there does not seem to be any instance of the classical use of the word as a babbler or a mere talker. He finds in the word a piece of Athenian slang, applied to one who was outside any literary circle, an ignorant plagiarist." What an indictment then the use of this word is against the apostle Paul.

Paul brought the truth and Christ Jesus to Athens. The great servant of God was no plagiarist or picker up of scraps but a genuine ambassador of the heavenly King. His credentials were of the highest order and his words the words of life. I am sure that being described as a 'babblers' didn't bother Paul so long as people listened carefully to his message. He wanted people to come to the risen Christ and be saved and he knew that philosophy could not save. After all, philosophies such as Stoicism and Epicureanism reflected the wisdom of man rather than the wisdom of God. He later wrote to the Corinthian saints, **"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? .....Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."** (1 Cor. 1:18-25)

What resulted from Paul's address in Athens? We read, **"And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, 'We will hear you again of this matter.' So Paul departed from among them. Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among whom were Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris and others with them."** (Acts 17:32-34) We don't read of a congregation being established in Athens and there was never a subsequent epistle to a church in Athens. The tragedy is that they were so filled with the wisdom of this passing age that they had no room for the wisdom of God in their hearts and minds.

The true 'babblers' of our world today are those who pontificate on various subjects contrary to the revelation of God. We hear them all the time in the media. They speak as if they possess all authority. I prefer to listen to Jesus who has truly been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18). We must listen to Jesus and obey Him. After all, it will be his words that will judge us in the last day. (John 12:48)