

PAUL AND THE PHILOSOPHERS:
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN HELLENISTIC
ATHENS (ACTS 17:18)

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***Abstract:** In this article, an encounter of the apostle Paul with Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in Athens during his second missionary journey is interpreted as an instance of intercultural communication in the Hellenistic world. This is shown in only two illocutions which the authorial narrator of the Acts ascribes to narrative characters representing the two philosophical schools. The article aims at showing what is to be perceived and interpreted as intercultural communication, how textual pragmatics conveys interculturality in communication, and which theoretical concepts of this kind of verbal interaction are visible in the examples.*

Key Words: Acts 17:18; Epicureans; Hellenism; Intercultural Communication; Saint Paul; Stoics.

Introduction

Taking¹ a phenomenological and pragmatic approach to intercultural communication, the following article will deal with two illocutions found embedded in the narrative of Acts 17:18:

τινὲς δὲ καὶ τῶν Ἐπικουρείων καὶ Στοικῶν φιλοσόφων συνέβαλλον αὐτῷ, καὶ τινες ἔλεγον· τί ἂν θέλοι ὁ σπερμολόγος οὗτος λέγειν; οἱ δὲ ξένων δαιμονίων δοκεῖ καταγγελεὺς εἶναι, ὅτι τὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ τὴν ἀνάστασιν εὐηγγελίζετο.

Also, some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babblers want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Three questions shall be addressed:

¹ Translation from the original German text was by Antje Krat.

1. When does an interaction have to be perceived and assessed as a case of intercultural communication?
2. How does linguistic pragmatics create intercultural communication in the narrative of Acts 17:18?
3. Which forms of intercultural communication become apparent in Acts 17:18 under the perspective of communication theory?

Interaction as Intercultural Communication

From a phenomenological perspective, instances of *intercultural* communication are based on two correlated elementary concepts: the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other.’² If any human interaction is to be called communication, a flow of verbal and non-verbal information or messages from sender to receiver is assumed to be perceived in any model of communication, whether linear, interactive, or dialogical. From an aesthetic and epistemic point of view, the systematic transition from either coding to decoding the actual content or the illocutionary force of messages predominates. Because of an individual’s culture, intercultural communication additionally invokes the concepts of Self and Other during the cognitive process. The Self highlights where entities such as objects, animals, people, or concepts differ from others concerning culture. To distinguish between the Self and the Other means to activate the concepts of cultural identity. Within an instance of intercultural communication, the identity of sender and receiver is the phenomenological and hermeneutical key to the coding and decoding of messages. The encounter of different identities accounts for the illocutionary force of verbal or non-verbal messages. Syntax (in verbal utterances), semantics, and pragmatics of the messages are all subject to the distinction between the Self and the Other. The cognitive and emotive mental activity accompanying verbal or non-verbal intercultural communication tints the actual message with the colours of identity.

If the interacting parties perceive and assess their statements as not only diverging in semiosis but as diverging in semiosis because of their different cultural background, then it is an instance of intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is thus the coding and decoding of the Self in opposition to the Other. The Self is

² Cf. Hamid R. Yousefi, *Interkulturelle Kommunikation. Eine praxisorientierte Einführung* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2014), 83.

confronted with the experience and the mystery of insight into the Other. Intercultural communication is the phenomenology and hermeneutics of cultural identities.³

Essentially, the cultural Self is what endows one's existence with a reason, worth, and purpose. More pragmatically, the Self derives orientation from the past and casts the present in a reasonable and the future in an acceptable light. From a phenomenological perspective, it is the familiar, the Self, the habitual, and the anticipated. Epistemologically and according to the logic of language, the Other is anything that diverges from this. Experiencing the Other implies potential cognitive dissonance and emotional perturbation. From the perspective of individual and social psychology as well as cultural anthropology, the identity-generating Self is something hard-earned in weal and woes throughout history, which has become well-beloved over generations. The Other is a potential threat and aggressor. If the perceived divergence from the Self is interpreted as a threat, defensive or hostile reactions may result.⁴ A look not only at the history of so-called heroes and heroines teaches us that human beings rather give up their lives than their cultural identity. Perhaps due to his cosmopolitan views, Herodotus had a keen eye for the tremendous influence of cultures on human thought and behaviour:

¹ For if it were proposed to all nations to choose which seemed best of all customs, each, after examination, would place its own first; so well is each convinced that its own is by far the best. ² It is not, therefore, to be supposed that anyone, except a madman, would turn such things to ridicule. I will give this one proof among many from which it may be inferred that all men hold this belief about their customs. ³ When Darius was king, he summoned the Greeks who were with him and asked them for what price they would eat their fathers' dead bodies. They answered that there was no price for which they would do it. ⁴ Then Darius summoned those Indians who are called Callatiae, who eat their parents, and asked them (the Greeks being present and understanding through interpreters what was said) what would make them willing to burn their fathers at death. The Indians cried aloud, that he should not speak of so horrid

³ Cf. Yousefi, *Interkulturelle Kommunikation*, 84-86.

⁴ Cf. D. Kumbier and F. Schulz von Thun, eds., *Interkulturelle Kommunikation. Methoden, Modelle, Beispiele* (Hamburg: Rowohlt-Taschenbuch, 2021), 11, 32.

an act. So firmly rooted are these beliefs; and it is, I think, rightly said in Pindar's poem that custom is lord of all (Hdt. 3.38).⁵

The dystopian obliteration of identity or its renunciation is no teleological principle intercultural communication is subjected. It may rather heighten one's awareness of the Self, contrasted by the Other. By contrasting it with the Other, the Self seems clearer, more tangible and comprehensible. Intercultural communication clarifies the identity of the Self.⁶ However, its pragmatics is undetermined. The Self may be strengthened, while the Other is weakened; but it is also possible that the Other is strengthened, while the Self becomes weaker. A translation of the Self as well as the Other to the point of complete negation of either, is part of the potential of intercultural communication.

If the message of an instance of intercultural communication derives its illocutionary power from the identities of its sender and receiver, then it is not part of a cognitive activity performed by individuals who have to be assumed to possess an absolute and solipsistic identity. Any instance of intercultural communication is in essence an act of perceiving and evaluating the divergence of the Self and the Other from the perspective of any social identity involved.

No human being can create their identity without integrating any of the convictions and desires of the reference groups that surround them.⁷ Those convictions and desires are fundamental elements of culture and can be described with adjectives like religious, political, ideological, scientific-analytical, and holistic and comprise the fields of language, everyday life and family, history, tradition, art, science, or religion.⁸ Any human being retains their distinctive identity, no matter whether it be on grounds of ontogenesis (because of their DNA),⁹ the 'animalistic' I in individual psychology, a unique creaturehood in theology (cf. Gen. 1:27; 2:7; Psa. 95:6; 100:1), or because our communicative reactions are not biologically determined. They are performed with delay, using gestures and words as symbols and are thus open towards the respective physical and psychological

⁵ A.D. Godley, ed., *Perseus Digital Library: Herodotus, The Histories*, Hdt. 3.38. Tufts University; <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:tlg.0016.001:3:38.2022/09>

⁶ Cf. I. Vallejo, *Papyrus. Die Geschichte der Welt in Büchern* (Zürich: Diogenes, 2022), 297.

⁷ Cf. Kumbier and Schulz von Thun, *Interkulturelle Kommunikation*, 32.

⁸ Cf. Yousefi, *Interkulturelle Kommunikation*, 28.

⁹ Cf. R. Greene, *Die täglichen Gesetze des Erfolgs* (München: FBV, 2022), 13.

dispositions and distinctive experiences of individuals.¹⁰ Still, from the perspective of philosophical pragmatism, the identity of the Self is in essence the self-esteem of the Self as mirrored by the other people of our self-culture (“looking-glass self”).¹¹ The timespan of their symbolic interactions is used by human beings to imagine how others will react to their gestures and words. Hence, they expect certain reactions to their behaviour. By expecting the respective expectations of their culture, they act in the expectable way themselves.¹² Intercultural communication is based on the anticipation of expectations. To this end, human beings play their identity as a historically conditioned role.¹³

In the context of intercultural communication, culture can, therefore, be described as a contingent-dynamic orientational system of identities along social roles with their respective existing and continually evolving anticipated expectations. A person’s culture is the basis and the reference point for the perception and assessment of their Self in communication and its perception and assessment as a social identity diverging from the Other.¹⁴ Ancient (and modern) frames of reference for these role identities at micro and macro levels are gender, languages, peer groups, schools, philosophies, religious groups, alliances of polities, loyalties, charismatic communities, clubs, trade associations, tribes, and ethnicities. Each Self can be recognized by its conventional set of non-verbal and verbal content, forms, impacts, and intentions which are shared, understood, accepted, passed on, and changed by a certain group. The moment convictions and desires of the Other do not meet the anticipated expectations of the Self any longer and this perceived and assessed divergence is expressed non-verbally and verbally, communication becomes intercultural.¹⁵

The communication between the Hellenistic schools of philosophers in Acts 17:18 is an example of how interculturalism can exist even within one single frame of reference. In present-day Western Europe,

¹⁰ Cf. R.D. Precht, *Sei du selbst. Eine Geschichte der Philosophie, Bd. 3: Von der Philosophie nach Hegel bis zur Philosophie der Jahrhundertwende* (München: Goldmann, 2019), 490-492.

¹¹ Cf. Precht, *Sei du selbst*, 489.

¹² Cf. Precht, *Sei du selbst*, 491.

¹³ Cf. Precht, *Sei du selbst*, 490-493.

¹⁴ Cf. Yousefi, *Interkulturelle Kommunikation*, 28.

¹⁵ Cf. Yousefi, *Interkulturelle Kommunikation*, 83-84.

literature about classism bears testimony to this, e.g. in Baron's "Ein Mann seiner Klasse" or "La Place" by Ernaux.¹⁶ Pragma-Linguistic and Intercultural Communication in Acts 17: 18?

The instances of intercultural communication narrated in Acts 17:18 are located in Athens (Acts 17:1, 5, 16). According to the absolute chronology of the extra-Biblical Gallio inscription, the historical year of reference for those fictional events is 50 AD. From the perspective of historical science, communication takes place in the Hellenistic period. From a long-term perspective, the "Hellenistic period lasted from 334 BC to 180 AD, extending from the campaigns of Alexander through the time of the Macedonian Diadochi to the monarchical Roman Empire under Marcus Aurelius."¹⁷ This era is characterized by high individual mobility in all areas of life, and interactive globalization of the Afro-Eurasian region. Encounters across ethnic, religious, philosophical, and economic boundaries are a constant life experience. Intercultural communication is a daily requirement, not least for the inhabitants of the Poleis of the Greek ecumene.

The communication in Acts 17:18 consists of two illocutionary acts, the first being an interrogative clause, and the second a declarative sentence. In coherence with the micro- and macro-narrative framework, they are both addressed to Paul, one of the great heroes of the Acts, by the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who are both mentioned in the collective plural. Whenever the Epicureans and Stoics refer to Paul's speeches in their illocutions, then it is about those contents in the readers' reception that the macro-narrative of the Acts contains about the whole kerygma of the apostle. The philosophers' illocutions take place in the Agora of Athens, following a linear model of communication. Questions and statements are sent and remain without any direct answer from the narrative figure of Paul, neither through interaction nor dialogue. Paul's answer is given in the form of a speech within a contracted narrative "in the middle of the Areopagus" (Acts 17:22-31).

The early Christian or contemporary reader who identifies with Paul is confronted with messages from groups of philosophers rather than

¹⁶ Cf. C. Baron, *Ein Mann seiner Klasse* (Alsbach: Claassen, 2020); A. Ernaux, *La place* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

¹⁷ Cf. A. Chaniotis, *Die Öffnung der Welt. Eine Globalgeschichte des Hellenismus* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2019), 12.

with statements made by historical or fictional characters. The syntactic marker for this fact is the use of the indefinite pronoun *τινὲς* (v. 18). However, the intra-narrative concept of Epicureans, Stoics, and Paul has extra-textual referents.

The stereotypical attribution by generalization so common in antiquity evokes the image of a meeting between idealized representatives of the cultures of Hellenistic philosophical schools and the cultural background of an eminent proponent of early Christian missionary activity. If a note by Flavius Josephus, who classifies the Pharisees as philosophers beside the Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots (*Ant. Jud.* 18,1-4.9),¹⁸ is taken into account, the authorial narrator creates the scene of a philosophical *Agon* by juxtaposing the protagonists, the Epicureans, the Stoics, and Paul, who belonged to the school of the Pharisees according to his own autobiographical testimony (*Acts* 5:34; 22:3).

All human interaction in antiquity worked in conformity with the challenge-response principle. It represents a demand concerning (cultural) identity to defend and preserve honour while avoiding shame or humiliation.¹⁹ The textual-pragmatic interculturalism of the *Agon* arises from the semantic implementation of the philosophical schools and the inferred character of Paul in that all acting persons of the textual world can be assigned an awareness of the divergence between their Self and the Other because of their extra-textual references. At least rhetorically, the historical Paul of the Letters rejects the Hellenistic wisdom of rational and logical reason as a hermeneutical key to his teachings (1 Cor 3:19-20). His work is styled as an anti-philosophy of ‘foolishness.’ According to their respective expectations placed on themselves, Epicureans and Stoics seem to be virtually made to negate each other. If one asserts something, the other claims the opposite as a matter of principle. No other philosophical cultures of the Hellenistic period are as antithetical as those of the Epicureans and the Stoics (see e.g. *Cic. Pis.* 22; *Cic. Nat.* 1:3).²⁰

¹⁸ Cf. B. Kollmann, *Einführung in die Neutestamentliche Zeitgeschichte* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2006), 87.

¹⁹ Cf. Kl. Neumann, “Art.: Kultur und Mentalität,” in: *HGANT*, ed. A. Berlejung and C. Frevel (Darmstadt: WBG, 2015), 38.

²⁰ Cf. L. De Crescenzo, *Geschichte der griechischen Philosophie. Von Sokrates bis Plotin* (Zürich: Diogenes, 1990), 181; 200-202; Vallejo, *Papyrus*, 567.

Through the proposition of the narrative frame containing the arguments of the Epicureans, Stoics, and the hero Paul, the plot builds up a multilayered intercultural line-up of characters. The communicative situation of the textual world is triangular and all protagonists take over the antagonists' field of action at some point, depending on the affected relational direction. The readers' response is to perceive antagonism which is supported by the use of the predicate *συνέβαλλον*. Combined with the dative object *αὐτοῖς*, it obtains the semantics of combative antagonism. Its meaning is "to clash with someone, to argue or to fight". The imperfect verb form *sune ballon* signals the lingering state of the *Agon*. However, only the relations between the Epicureans and Paul and between the Epicureans and the Stoics are portrayed as *flat-character* antagonism.

On the other hand, the illocutionary acts exchanged between Paul and the Stoics show signs of a receding divergence or even an effort to find convergence between the Self and the Other (Acts 17:18, 32). They are thus presented as *round characters*. Within this narrative framework, the pragmatics of the text enables the readers to envision a preliminary outline in order to understand the messages of the Epicureans and Stoics as an expression of a multi-perspective intercultural communication with the hero Paul.

The following speakers (*καί τινες ἔλεγον*), who bring forward the intercultural messages, are heterodiegetically introduced by the repetition of the indefinite pronoun *τινές* in the nominative plural. According to the means of cohesion and the readers' construction of coherence, *τινές* refers to the members of one of the philosophical schools. *Τινές* is linked to the Epicureans, who occur first in the narrative, by the parallelism of their being mentioned first within the syntactic order. A semantic-pragmatic analysis of the message confirms the readers' preliminary outline. The Epicureans send a message in direct speech in the shape of a content question (*τί*). The plot takes a turn toward the mimetic. The narrator passes on the awareness of divergence between the Self and the Other to the responsibility of the acting characters and thus leaves it to the readers' free play of associations without comment. The message of the Epicureans is set apart from their Self cultural semantics by its mimesis.

A perlocutionary act in the shape of a question is aimed at eliciting a reaction from the receivers. If they do not show any communicative

activity, the interaction is considered defective or unsuccessful. A question expresses a sense of inequality concerning knowledge, comprehension, desires, and convictions on part of the sender which the receiver is requested to assuage. In the agonism built up here, the sender seeks to determine their Self superior cultural position by way of asking questions. Concerning speech act typology, the illocutionary act can be classified as declarative-expressive. It is a declaration insofar as it refers to the meaning and signification of what Paul said to random listeners in the Agora (Acts 17:17). The predicate of the question is in the present-tense optative θέλοι. The particle ἄν expresses the potentiality of the optative form.²¹ The Epicureans do not ask “What does he (οὗτος = Paulus) want to say?” but rather “What is he trying to say?” Thus they imply that Paul’s speech is meaningless and does not make sense; Paul himself does not know what he is saying, what the content and intention of his message are. In their view, the Other (Paul) does not understand his Self. The Epicureans are not interested in a rational analysis of Paul’s arguments following the rules of reason. They act, according to the axioms of Socrates so popular in Athens at that time, not like ‘philosophically educated’ but rather like ‘self-opinionated’ people and refuse to enter a disputation using the means of dialogue and reason.

The expressive part of the illocutionary act becomes apparent in the attachment of the nominal argument of the proposition. The Epicureans do not query Paul in the way deemed adequate in face-to-face communication in antiquity. They do not use ‘you’ but instead they publicly name him a ‘*spermologos*.’ Because of the post-positioned demonstrative pronoun οὗτος, the readers infer the gesture of an outstretched arm pointing at Paul aloof (indifferently; snobbishly?) over a philosopher’s *pallium*. Hence, the readers may imagine the Epicureans as turned away from Paul and toward the other philosophers (and the rest of the onlookers) in the Agora. Paul is not considered a subject. As the Other, he is not credited with any Self.

In the New Testament, ‘*spermologos*’ is a *hapax legomenon*. It is translated as “grain gleaner” or “seed picker”. This metaphor from the world of birds (probably referring to rooks, cf. Aristoph. *Av.* 232, 576,

²¹ Cf. W. Haubeck and H. von Siebenthal, *Neuer sprachlicher Schlüssel zum griechischen Neuen Testament. Matthäus bis Apostelgeschichte* (Basel: Brunnen, 1997), 773.

579) labels Paul as someone who picks up indiscriminately and randomly anything that falls before his feet in the marketplace (Eust. *Od.* 1,233; 1,403), anything he finds during his emotional, gut feeling-guided search (cf. e.g. Plut. *Mor.* 456d; Demosth. 269,18).

He is not nourished, sated, and satisfied by the Self but instead looks for the Other, for what others have left or cast away. And he does not even pick up everything. Rather he naturally leaves some bits and pieces behind. He is never in possession of the whole, not even the whole of the Other. The ‘seed picking’ Paul is completely at odds with the philosophers’ aspirations to devise their respective teachings as stringently logical constructs of meaning and signification based on reason. They ridicule Paul. The protagonist one identifies with is publicly confronted with an intercultural challenge that carries the risk of possible shame and dishonour.

If ancient and modern readers with Plato’s epistemic views in mind are able to add other aspects to the meaning of the objectively visible from memory, then pragmatics allows an association with *spermologos* via the stylistic device of the paronomasia. This is especially true when this word comes to the Epicureans’ ears spoken by Stoics. In its physics, stoic philosophy is focused on one central term, the *spermatikos logos* (Plut. *Mor.* 637a; Zeno 1.39, 2.258) or *logos spermatikos*. The similarity in sound between *spermologos* and *spermatikos logos* can be considered a ‘pun’ of the Epicurean side. Thereby the Epicureans do not only deride Paul but also the Stoics in a subtle way. Paul and the Stoics are conceptually subsumed by the Epicureans. In the Other of Paul’s speech, the Epicureans perceive the Other of the Stoic teachings and consequently the Other in stoic philosophy, which is considered wrong in relation to their Self, is transferred to Paul. Within this stream of interpretations, textual pragmatics generates an intercultural proxy conflict, which is historically plausible considering the rivalry between Epicureans and Stoics.

From the angle of narratology, the inclusion of these paronomastic associations creates a multi-perspective intercultural communication full of tension, where the Self and the Other appear in stark contrast as well as with their boundaries blurred. The constellation of characters thereby looks more multifaceted. Comprehension and incomprehension, convergence and divergence undulate. Who is a friend or a

supporter and who is an antagonist in the intercultural encounters of the early Christians?

The second message is set apart from the first by the adversative of *δέ*. Cohesion results from the plural article *οἱ*, which is found in second position attached to *τινες ἔλεγον*. In the process of establishing coherence, the Stoics are the only possible senders. Their illocution can be considered a representative-declarative type of speech act. They state their understanding of the Other: “That’s what we have understood from the speeches of this preacher/messenger (*καταγγελεὺς*)! He seems to be talking about this and that.” The predicate of the proposition is *δοκεῖ*. This lets the Epicureans’ statement float in the Agora as something still uncertain and incompletely understood. In the matrix of the Self, the Stoics feel still undecided about how to conduct themselves towards the Other. The arguments of the proposition correspond with this.

Καταγγελεὺς is a designation used for the Other based on their occupation and derived from situational aesthetics. It does not originate exclusively from the semantic inventory of Stoic teachings. Rather, it corresponds with the general linguistic usage of pagan and early Christian people in the Hellenistic world (Acts 17:3). The Other is accepted the way it is perceived. The pragmatics of the text formulates a philosophical *Agon* that aims at clarification through arguments rather than mockery. However, the Stoics, too, display reserve. They too do not interact face-to-face, using the address “you”, but retain the third person *δοκεῖ*. Within the challenge-response pattern, their communication nevertheless remains on a level that allows the Other to save face. *Καταγγελεὺς* is a gentle hint at a perceived and attested divergence. Paul is not called a philosopher; he does not belong to their group. His rhetoric style of *διελέγετο* (Acts 17:17) does not correspond to the reason-based, open, searching dialogue of the Socratic tradition.²² Paul is a preacher, he proclaims a message which is not his Self, which he did neither conceive of nor elaborate himself. From the Stoic point of view, Paul does not even talk about himself but about

²² Cf. W. Pleger, *Sokrates. Zur dialogischen Vernunft* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2020), 54-55, 266.

what an Other assigned him. Yet despite that, the Stoics take up the content of Paul's message, if in the way they think they understood it.

His speech is assumed to be an instance of intercultural communication since it deals with a different concept of God. The speech is recognized in its 'Otherness' because of its different theology or religion. This way of perceiving the speech manifests itself in the proposition of the argument ξένων δαιμονίων. In the Stoics' perception, Paul is talking about other or alien gods. The adjective ξένων initially pigeon-holes the Other or the foreign as intercultural Other. Δαιμονίων is part of their Self cultural semantics. The word could be used for the Olympic gods as well as for lesser deities. However, the twofold semantics of the expression is perceivable for the historic figure as well as the Paul of the narrative and early Christian as well as modern readers. It is necessary to tell what the Stoics designate as the Other in their statement. What exactly the Stoics perceive as diverging from their Self concerning those other gods can be found in a causal subordinate clause: "Jesus and the Resurrection" (ὅτι τὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ τὴν ἀνάστασιν εὐηγγελίζετο). Due to their theology, both items are classified as deities, no matter whether the respective philosophers consider 'Jesus' and 'the Resurrection' proper names that refer to persons or whether they understand that at least 'Resurrection' denominates a physical state or a principle. In any case, the philosophers adopt Paul's linguistic inventory word for word (Acts 17:3,31) and thus leave the intrinsic value of the Other intact. They even leave the operator of the contents unchanged. These gods are proclaimed as "good news" by the messenger. Even though εὐαγγελίζω is no unknown term in the Hellenistic linguistic world, the way it is used by the Stoics shows that they leave the contents of Paul's speech as specified by the sender (e.g. Acts 13:32; 14:7.21). The Other is semantically adapted, it is neither depreciated nor denied. Convergence and divergence make intercultural communication oscillate dialectically.

Intercultural Communication Under the Perspective of Communication Theory

Pragmatics may shed light on the intercultural attitude of the two schools of philosophy. For this purpose, communication theory knows two different models of hermeneutics. 'Apocyclic' hermeneutics is a method of understanding that sees itself as the very centre and the Other as the outer periphery; it is self-referential. Other mindsets and

world views are only looked at from the Self perspective. The theory proceeds in a restorative-reductive manner. ‘Encyclic’ hermeneutics makes a serious effort to make the Self and the Other come into interaction. It is an argumentative method. Convergences and divergences should be of equal importance.²³

Contrary to the storyline, the Stoic attitude shall be discussed first because the Epicureans communicate along Stoic semantics and, therefore, this has to be clarified first. The Stoics are amenable to encyclical hermeneutics. The reason for this is that their philosophy is basically theological. Deities do exist and act in and affect the world. This is how they can be recognized. In the entities ‘Jesus’ and ‘Resurrection,’ which they call ‘foreign gods,’ the Stoics are able to recognize principles and ideas from their physics, their teachings about the natural world, that they can discuss and relate to because they are similar. Knowing Stoic philosophy, the narrator’s mimetic presentation reduces the received message. The moments ‘Jesus’ and ‘Resurrection’ made the Stoics sit up and take notice, the qualifier ξένων does not signal a closed hermeneutic process. The two semantic aspects of ξένων, a stranger and a friend from another place whom one visits regularly when travelling, hint at the social reality of Hellenistic times. Hellenism exhibited a cosmopolitan side. It was open towards strangers. Something foreign was simply the unfamiliar that had not been known before, for example, because it came from distant countries. The Other, the foreign should be turned into something familiar through knowledge.²⁴ The era’s high mobility was helpful in that. The otherness of Paul’s gods is perceived as merely an instance of *religio migrans*, which was a daily experience.²⁵ Soon, it was no longer possible to tell what oneself was and what was not.²⁶

In the world of the narrative, the Stoics perceive Paul as one out of a plethora of travelling and immigrating philosophers, preachers, and proclaimers. This atmosphere of a flow of migration and mobility in historic Athens is aptly rendered by the narrator (Ἀθηναῖοι δὲ πάντες

²³ Cf. Yousefi, *Interkulturelle Kommunikation*, 102-103.

²⁴ Cf. Vallejo, *Papyrus*, 414 f.

²⁵ Cf. C. Auffahrt, “Religiöses Denken und sakrales Handeln. Grundlegendes zum Verständnis antiker Religion,” in *Imperium der Götter. Isis – Mithras – Christus. Kulte und Religionen im Römischen Reich*, ed. B. Landesmuseum (Darmstadt, WBG, 2013), 17.

²⁶ Cf. Auffahrt, “Religiöses Denken,” 17.

καὶ οἱ ἐπιδημοῦντες ξένοι - Acts 17:21). Paul's alien gods are gods from distant countries. They have not yet immigrated to Athens and made their home there, but they could. Therefore, their Otherness is tested for truth and plausibility. Thus, the Stoic *συνέβαλλον* presents itself on the intercultural stage as a combativeness in dialogue to find the best argument, but not as an *Agon* to prove the superiority of the Self.

As a logical consequence of their physics, the pantheistic Stoics are monotheists and polytheists at the same time. They are monotheists only regarding the primal ground, the demiurge, the creative shaper of everything and the one cosmos. One cosmic god at the centre holds together all entities in the cosmos and acts pantheistically from within them so that they resonate and interact in harmony. The cosmos is a living organism which is sustained in its unity by a steady, life-giving breath, the *Pneuma*.²⁷ This notion was understood to be rational animism.²⁸ Despite all the rationale of Stoic theism, the phenomena, forces, and entities of physics may receive a naturalistic-mythological allegorisation of the traditional gods. The demiurge is Zeus, the Olympian father of gods. His name etymologically refers to the steerer because everything is sustained by him. Here, the Stoics can identify convergences with their Self and the alien, near eastern-biblical Maker of Paul's speech (Acts 17:24: ὁ θεὸς ὁ ποιήσας τὸν κόσμον καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ).

The Stoic philosophers are polytheists in their view of the different manifestations or hypostases of Zeus in the elements, forces, and celestial bodies of the unfolded cosmos. Athena is called Zeus because his steering organ reaches into the ether, Hera because he extends into the air.²⁹ In this way, encyclical hermeneutics explains the plurality of deities perceived by the Stoics. Jesus and the Resurrection are hypostases and manifestations of the one God creating and directing. A proper name like 'Jesus' represents the cultural Other much in the same manner as e.g. Athena relates to Zeus in the Self naturalistic allegorization. Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus as a father shows that Stoicism was able of a personalistic theism that transcended mere

²⁷ Cf. M. Forscher, *Die Philosophie der Stoa. Logik, Physik und Ethik* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2018); R. Greene, *Die täglichen Gesetze des Erfolgs* (München: FBV, 2022), 149.

²⁸ Cf. Forscher, *Die Philosophie der Stoa*, 150.

²⁹ Cf. Forscher, *Die Philosophie der Stoa*, 144-149.

allegorises.³⁰ If the Stoics regarded at least ‘Jesus’ as a name, they could have embedded this into their self-concept as the personification of a deity.

For the Stoics, only bodies are real because only they can cause effects, suffer or interact.³¹ This ontological deduction is based on two principles – ἀρξῆ - of Stoic cosmogony and cosmology. On the one hand, this is the passive τό πάσξον, suffering, and vague. On the other hand, there is the active (τό ποιούν), shaping, and invigorating. Matter is passive, while reason (λόγος) or spirit (πνεῦμα) or God (ὁ θεός) is active. God is physical insofar as he can affect anything, matter is physical because it can suffer. The ‘active’ principle, the divine spirit, pervades all matter and thus educes everything, the whole cosmos, and every single entity within, from itself in a creative manner. In this vitalistic-corporatist worldview, it is only logical that all beings are composed of matter and spirit.

Every such compound is corporeal because it can affect the world and it can be subject to suffering. Where there is a creative becoming, there is also a passing away of what has been created. The ‘active’ and ‘passive’ principles and the becoming and passing away are parallel concepts. Hence, Stoic philosophy necessarily knows that gods do not endure eternally. They can die and be revived. However, transience only affects the hypostases, the manifestations of the one God, who is subject to suffering. As the eternal, acting principle, he is exempt from this process and imperishable.³² In Paul’s speech about the suffering of Christ or Jesus and his resurrection from the dead through the action of the one God (Acts 17:3, 31), the Stoics may recognize convergences to their cosmic principles of the active and the suffering and the deduced concepts of becoming and transitoriness. The Stoics’ reaction to Paul’s speech in the Areopagus supports the interpretation of their attitude as being informed by encyclical hermeneutics. They want to continue the discourse, not end it: Ἀκούσαντες δὲ ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν οἱ μὲν ἐγλεύαζον, οἱ δὲ εἶπαν· ἀκουσόμεθά σου περὶ τούτου καὶ πάλιν (Acts 17:32).

³⁰ Cf. Forschner, *Die Philosophie der Stoa*, 156-157.

³¹ Cf. Forschner, *Die Philosophie der Stoa*, 95.

³² Cf. Forschner, *Die Philosophie der Stoa*, 95-97, 105-106, 114.

The Stoics' encyclical hermeneutic attitude toward Paul is not unnoticed by the Epicureans in the world of the narrative. Their illocution is marked by apocyclical hermeneutics. They distance themselves from Paul and his semantics and interpret them to be the complete Other. The term *spermologos* – if the paronomasia with *spermatikos logos* is kept in mind – is not only an attack on Paul but also on the Stoics. The Epicureans aim at the Stoics' vitalistic corporalism, where the connectedness of the human being with the creator-demiurge is narrated as an organismic model with sexual features. In the way the term *spermatikos logos* reminds us of *semen*, God's agency is not expressed in terms of rational physics but as a mythologic-sexual act. The deity or spirit affects matter the way sperm affects the mother's womb. The deity is the active principle within suffering. The divine *Pneuma* does not exert its influence on matter from the outside like a craftsman but from within, pervading matter, pouring into everything that is. This is the demiurgic work of the deity. Within the *spermatikos logos*, the active principle and the affected one are connected. All beings emanate from the *spermatikos logos*. Hence, all human beings are *spermatikoi logoi*.³³ As a consequence, Paul can also be a *spermatikos logos*, when he plays to the Stoics. In this way, the Epicureans ridicule the effect that the *spermologos* Paul must have had on his listeners in the world of the narrative.

The intended pun mocks how they perceive Paul to 'penetrate' his listeners as in a sexual act in order to convince them. Thus, they see the Other they disapprove of not only in the context of Paul's speeches but also in his rhetoric and nonverbal behaviour. The vitalistic-corporatist concept of the divine demiurge is diametrically opposed to their self-concept of atomistic-mechanistic materialism. Everything that perceptibly exists, and all sensory perceptions results from physical processes caused by rapidly moving atoms. They collide and rebound, intertwine or detach again and in the process, meet new atoms (Epik. ad Hdt. 41-45). The Epicurean divergence from Paul's and the Stoics' theology is associated with those notions and does not have any ontological cause. Epicureans are no atheists; in their worldview, the gods exists (Epik.ad Men.123-124).³⁴ They should even be offered

³³ Cf. Forscher, *Die Philosophie der Stoa*, 105-106, 111, 117, 145, 149, 153.

³⁴ Cf. W. Spickermann, "Götterreich. Das Wesen der römischen Religion," in *Imperium der Götter. Isis – Mithras – Christus. Kulte und Religionen im Römischen Reich*, ed B. Landesmuseum (Darmstadt: WBG, 2013, 20).

sacrifices because they have to be venerated (Epik. *Epist.Fragment* 105,1). However, they neither create nor move anything and they are not responsible for any order in nature. From the Epicurean point of view, they are merely the ethical ideal of a beatific life, which has to be imitated or pursued (Epik.ad *Men.*135). In this context, the Self is clearly set apart from Paul's and the Stoics' Other.

In the Epicureans' intercultural communication, harsh apocyclical hermeneutics predominate. In their opinion, the hollow semantics and pragmatics of a "seed picker" is not worthy of any attention. They do not attach great importance to intercultural dialogue anyway. Epicurus himself directed his students to only study his writings. They are supposed to immerse themselves in them regularly in the company of like-minded people in order to achieve firmness in their Self philosophy. What is important to others, like to the wandering, early Christian missionary Paul, is contemptuously treated in a semantically transgressive way as if it were the futile result of haphazard poking. There is no struggle for comprehension of the Other in a dialogue. As acting figures within the narrative world, the Epicureans consistently remain in the flat character mode, also with respect to their hermeneutics. Their reaction to Paul's speech, which follows the illocution about the *spermologos* in the narrative, is repeated mockery of what they have heard. They deride the semantics of the Resurrection, which the Stoics consider a reason for further discourse: Ἀκούσαντες δὲ ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν οἱ μὲν ἐγλεύαζον, οἱ δὲ εἶπαν· ἀκουσόμεθά σου περὶ τούτου καὶ πάλιν (Acts 17:32).

Conclusion

Through his plot, the narrator of the Acts of the Apostles creates the phenomenon of intercultural communication with a complex constellation of characters that oscillates between the forms of apocyclical and encyclical hermeneutics. The narration renders the events with a high level of historical plausibility. The intercultural colouring of early Christians and the great Hellenistic philosophical schools of the Epicureans and the Stoics is semantically and pragmatically fictionalized appropriately. In Athens, the symbolic place of Greek philosophy, Luke tells of the most intellectually demanding challenge that early Christians in the Hellenistic Roman Empire could see themselves confronted with.

Since they also revealed their culture outside the familiar reference groups of biblical traditions, they immediately encountered sharply and systematically thought-out concepts and arguments from other cultures. This was a challenge for their thinking because confronted with a completely different argumentation, it became necessary to check one's content for its coherence and to assimilate suggestions of the Other, as Paul does in his speech which ties in with Stoic philosophy (Acts 17:22-31). In addition, intercultural communication was a motor for developing one's Christian identity. Faith had to find its firmness through intercultural challenges of its identity. The author and narrator of the Acts of the Apostles make it very plain to his reader Theóphilos that certitude in faith is the goal of reading the text (Luke 1:4). Being able to communicate in the anticipated expectations in an interculturally confident way was no least a matter of survival. E. Lévinas' experience after Auschwitz proves true: "The outer limit is the relationship of the Self to the Other, the reception I give the Other."³⁵ Early and contemporary Christians alike have to ask themselves: "Am I certain enough about myself to receive the Other?" Paul claimed this firmness and was thus able to step out of the middle of an intercultural *Agon* again: οὕτως ὁ Παῦλος ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ μέσου αὐτῶν (Acts 17:33).

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³⁵ Cited from Vallejo, *Papyrus*, 298.