

## Lesson 6 Acts 15-16-17 Handout - Epicurean and Stoic Philosophers

Classical Greek philosophy developed in four main schools of thought in ancient Athens. The earliest schools were the Platonists, about 400 BC, and the Aristotelians, or Peripatetics, about 350 BC. The Epicureans and Stoics appeared around 300 BC and by the first century AD were the two most popular schools of thought in Athens. However, by this time all four schools had evolved, and some had borrowed elements from others.

**The Epicureans were founded by Epicurus (341–270 BC).** His followers did not believe in an afterlife and held that the world was formed by the chance unions of atomic particles. Since they believed that even gods were formed from atoms and did not intervene at all in human lives, Epicureans declared that people could live free of the widespread pagan dread that the gods might arbitrarily victimize them. However, neither could people expect that the gods would help them. We are on our own in this universe and have to make the best of this present life, since there is no other. Some Epicureans considered pleasure a sign that one is living a good life, as enjoying one's job is an indication that one is doing it well. Although the Epicureans did not deny there were gods, their disbelief in divine intervention and their rejection of religion made them look to outsiders like atheists.

**The Stoics were founded by Zeno** about 320 BC. The school is named after a *stoa* or colonnade in Athens where Zeno taught. Stoics sought to live according to nature, which they perceived as divine and whose guiding principle was “reason” (*logos*). They taught that everything is subject to the laws of nature or “fate,” which probably contributed to the ancient and modern stereotype of the Stoic as one who resignedly puts up with circumstances. Stoic ethics stressed self-sufficiency, self-control, and obedience to reason and duty. The Stoics were perceived as being more open to religious belief than Epicureans, and some later Stoics exhibited a genuine religious spirit. Some Stoic ideas on divine providence were used and adapted by ancient Jewish and Christian thinkers. <sup>a1</sup>

---

<sup>a</sup> See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 604–5; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra pagina 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 313.

<sup>1</sup> Kurz, W. S. (2013). *Acts of the Apostles*. (P. S. Williamson & M. Healy, Eds.) (p. 269). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.