A Comparative Analysis of the Song of Moses and Paul’s Speech to the Athenians

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Abstract

This essay undertakes a comparative analysis of the Song of Moses and Paul’s speech to the Athenians. One incentive for doing so is the opportunity to address the issue of whether Paul overly diluted his proclamation of the gospel to accommodate the proclivities of his pagan (gentile) audience. A second motivation for considering the relationship between these two portions of scripture is that this topic has received only a cursory consideration in the secondary academic literature. This study concludes that at a literary, conceptual, and linguistic level, Paul connected his message to the Athenians with the theological perspective of the Song of Moses (and more broadly with that of the Tanakh). Another determination is that the apostle did not weaken his declaration of the good news to oblige the tendencies of his listeners. Rather, Paul examined the most exemplary archetypes of secular philosophical thought in his day, compared their dogmas to the truths of scripture, and declared how God’s Word is infinitely superior.

1 The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.
1. Introduction

The word *Deuteronomy* means ‘repetition of the law’, and this book is called such because it recites the Law of Moses a second time. Covering the period from about a month before to a month after Moses’ death (c. 1406 BC), Deuteronomy contains Moses’ reminders to the Israelites about their covenant with the Lord. It also records Moses’ transferring leadership responsibilities to his protégé, Joshua. In this book, the Israelite leader recorded a series of speeches to the Israelites about how they were to conduct themselves when they entered the Promised Land. In an effort to prepare them for the challenge of the future, Moses urged them to recall the laws and experiences of their past. He emphasized those laws that were especially needed for the people to make a successful entrance into Canaan.

Just as Deuteronomy is the literary bridge between the Pentateuch and the historical books of the Old Testament, so too Acts spans the gap between the gospel accounts and the letters of instruction that compose much of the New Testament. Moreover, in Acts, the narrative picks up where the gospels leave off, telling about the early days of the Christian church. Acts reveals that after Jesus ascended to heaven, the church experienced phenomenal growth. Jesus did not leave his followers unprepared for the task at hand; instead, he gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit, who filled them with supernatural power. Jesus’ followers became a channel for the flow of God’s Spirit. It was an extension of God’s hand, reaching out to do his work in a world full of need.

The foregoing preliminary background information helps establish the context for the focus of this essay, namely, a comparative analysis of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 and Paul’s speech to the Athenians in Acts 17. A cursory glance might suggest these two passages of scripture are unrelated. Nonetheless, a methodical reading
of the respective biblical texts indicates a much closer connection between the two. As this paper argues, Paul connected his message to the Athenians, at a literary, conceptual, and linguistic level, with the worldview of the Song of Moses (and more broadly with that of the Tanakh). One incentive for examining these two portions of God’s Word is that doing so addresses the issue of whether Paul overly diluted his proclamation of the gospel to accommodate the proclivities of his pagan (gentile) audience.

A second motivation for considering the relationship between Deuteronomy 32 and Acts 17 is that this topic has received only a cursory consideration in the secondary academic literature. By way of example, while Gärtner (1955:167–70) overviews the ‘Old Testament–Jewish tradition in the Areopagus speech’, he does not deal with the Song of Moses. Also, even though Hays (1989:163) mentions ‘numerous allusions’ that Paul makes to the ‘Song of Moses in Deuteronomy’, Hays does not specifically consider the apostle’s speech to the Athenians.

The discussion provided by Soards (1994:95–100) on Acts 17:22–31 only refers to one possible connection between verse 26 and the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 32:8 (p. 98). Likewise, Stonehouse (1949:33) makes a solitary reference to this verse (specifically in fn. 29). Moreover, Scott (1994:543) allocates just one paragraph to discuss the same intertextual correspondence. Given (2001:49) also devotes only a single paragraph to summarize the ‘verbal and/or thematic parallels’ between these two biblical passages. Finally, Arnold (2002:390–1), Schnittjer (2006:532–3), and Morgan (2012a:88–9; 2012b:147) each provide less than two pages, respectively, of general comments related to the connection between Deuteronomy 32 and Acts 17.
2. Literary Parallels between the Song of Moses and Paul’s Speech to the Athenians

An examination of the secondary literature indicates there is no scholarly consensus concerning the organizational scheme of either the Song of Moses\(^2\) or Paul’s speech to the Athenians.\(^3\) It is beyond the scope of this essay to sort out and resolve the disparate views among specialists (assuming it is even possible to do so); instead, this lack of agreement provides an incentive for taking a fresh approach to the way in which these two passages are arranged. What follows are the organizational schemes for the respective biblical texts put forward in this essay, along with an explanation of the relationship between the structural elements. As the discourse below points out, there are potentially intriguing literary parallels that draw attention to the close connection between the Song of Moses and Paul’s speech to the Athenians.


2.1. The Organizational Scheme for the Song of Moses (Deut. 31:30–32:44)

Prologue: 31:30
God’s summoning of witnesses: 32:1–3
  God’s accusation of Israel’s disloyalty: 32:4–6
  God’s loving actions on Israel’s behalf: 32:7–14
  God’s indictment of Israel’s rebellion: 32:15–18
  God’s decision to punish Israel: 32:19–25
God’s censure of Israel’s foes: 32:26–31
  God’s punishment of Israel’s foes: 32:32–35
  God’s vindication of Israel: 32:36–38
  God’s execution of justice: 32:39–42
God’s call for songs of praise: 32:43
Epilogue: 32:44

In Deuteronomy 31:1–29, Moses\(^4\) told the Israelites that he was no longer capable of leading them. So, he urged them to be strong and courageous as they entered the land of Canaan. Then, after instructing the people to submit to the leadership of Joshua, the lawgiver presented the written decrees and ordinances to the priests. Moses told them to read the law regularly to God’s people. Moses also foretold that after his death, the Israelites would rebel against the Lord.

Next, a representative number of Israelites were summoned to hear their leader recite the words of a lyrical oration. Deuteronomy 31:30 is the prologue to the Song of Moses. The latter is presented as a ‘prophetic poem’ (Niehaus 1997:530) containing ‘didactic and legal strains’

(Weitzman 1994:393) on the subject of Israel’s future apostasy in Canaan. Verse 30 states that Israel’s lawgiver declared the entire content of the ode to the leaders of the nation, who had convened in his presence. Deuteronomy 32:44 is the corresponding epilogue. This verse not only reiterates what is conveyed in 31:30, but also adds that Joshua (Hebrew, Hoshea) was with Moses during the recital.

Deuteronomy 32:1–3 is God’s summoning of witnesses, namely, the ‘heavens’ and the ‘earth’.

Moses depicted his speech as instruction that nourished and promoted life. Israel’s leader also regarded the content of his teaching as a proclamation of the Lord’s name, which resulted in his people praising God for his greatness (or magnificence). Verse 43 is the matching call for songs of praise. Moses directed the pagan nations to shout for joy with God’s people. The reason for doing so was the assurance that Israel’s divine Warrior would vindicate the atrocities his foes inflicted upon the Israelites. Moreover, the Commander of heaven’s armies would cleanse the Promised Land and its people of the guilt associated with their iniquity.

According to the preceding organizational scheme, a descending stair-step literary pattern is found in verses 4–25 and 26–42, in which the series of verses within each respective group progressively advances or extends Moses’ overall train of thought. For instance, verses 4–6 spotlight God’s accusation of Israel’s disloyalty. This reprimand was warranted because the nation spurned God’s loving actions on the people’s behalf (vv. 7–14). In turn, Israel’s rebellion was the basis for God’s indictment (vv. 15–18). Furthermore, the nation’s culpability led to God’s decision to punish his people (vv. 19–25).

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5 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are the author’s personal translation of the respective biblical texts being cited.
The nations God used to discipline Israel were also accountable to him. Verses 26–31, which parallel the thought in verses 4–6, record God’s censure of Israel’s foes. His reprimand found in verses 32–35 points to the legitimacy of his decision to punish the enemies of his people. This action contrasts sharply with God’s covenantal love for his people, as delineated in verses 7–14. In dealing forthrightly with Israel’s adversaries, God vindicated the cause of his people (vv. 36–38). He remained virtuous in doing so, for he did not hesitate to also hold the Israelites accountable for their crimes (vv. 15–18). Finally, as God punished Israel (vv. 19–25), likewise he executed justice on the nation’s enemies (vv. 39–42).

2.2. The organizational scheme for Paul’s speech to the Athenians (Acts 17:16–34)

Prologue: the apostle’s discourse with people in Athens: 17:16–17
The Athenian philosophers’ intrigue with Paul: 17:18–21
   The Athenians’ complete ignorance of God: 17:22–23
      The creation’s absolute dependence on God: 17:24–25
         The total reliance of humanity on God: 17:26–28
      The incomparable nature of God: 17:29
         The divine summons to repent: 17:30
            The future judgment of humanity: 17:31
The mixed response of the Athenians: 17:32
Epilogue: the conversion of some in Athens: 17:33–34

It was during Paul’s Second Missionary Journey (c. AD 49–52; Acts 15:39–18:22) that he stopped at the city-state of Athens. This centre of Greek learning and culture was located five miles inland from the Aegean Sea (cf. Gempf 1993:51; Martin 1992:513; McRay 2000:139; Witherington 1998:513). At the start of the apostle’s excursion from Jerusalem, he took Silas and headed for Galatia by a land route. Then,
in Lystra, Timothy joined the team. The Holy Spirit prevented Paul from proclaiming the Gospel in Asia and Bithynia. Next, the apostle saw a vision summoning him to Macedonia, where the missionaries won converts and faced opposition. After Paul delivered a girl from an evil spirit, he and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi. An earthquake shattered the prison and led to the conversion of the jailer and his family. Thereafter, from Thessalonica to Berea, opposition followed the missionaries. This impelled Paul’s supporters to escort him to Athens. Meanwhile, Silas and Timothy stayed behind in Berea to establish the new believers.

As with the Song of Moses, so too opening and concluding literary elements precede Paul’s speech to the Athenians. Specifically, 17:16–17 is the prologue, which records the apostle’s discourse with the people in the city. As he got acquainted with the residents, Paul became deeply upset by the sight of the idols throughout Athens. Despite his agitation, the apostle remained tactful as he told others about Jesus and his resurrection. Paul’s interlocutors included Jews and God-fearing gentiles in the synagogues, as well as patrons the apostle happened to meet in the city’s local marketplace. Verses 33–34 are the corresponding epilogue. The text notes that a modest number of Athenians were converted before Paul left the city.

Verses 18–21 record the Athenian philosophers’ intrigue with Paul. Discussing novel views was the favorite pastime of the elitists and resident foreigners. For all that, some regarded the apostle as an unsophisticated scavenger of ideas, while others were suspicious of the foreign deities he seemed to be peddling. Verse 32 puts forward the

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6 The version of Paul’s speech to the Athenians recorded in Acts is presumed to be a historically accurate rendition of what the apostle said (cf. Bock 2007:559; Bruce 1988:334; Fudge 1971:193; Witherington 1998:519).
matching disdainful response of the intelligentsia. Their initial attitude toward Paul was pejorative, and this explains why they did not hesitate to scoff when he declared the doctrine of rising from the dead. In turn, their disapproval meant the city’s Aristocratic Council presumably barred the apostle from any further proclamation of the gospel in Athens.\(^7\)

As with the Song of Moses, the summary of Paul’s speech in Athens consists of two descending stair step literary patterns. To be specific, verses 22–28 and 29–31, respectively, advance or extend the apostle’s overall train of thought. For instance, verses 22–23 summarise the Athenians’ ignorance of God, which mirrored that of all humankind. Next, verses 24–25 emphasise the severity of this extreme deficit by drawing attention to the creation’s absolute dependence on God. Verses 26–28 narrow the focus even further by spotlighting the total reliance of humanity on God.

Humankind’s ignorance of God is due in part to his incomparable nature, as pointed out in verse 29. This text also emphasizes God’s role as the Creator of all human beings and implies that he is their supreme Lord. In conjunction with the truth recorded in verses 24–25 (that the creation is absolutely dependent on God), verse 30 goes even further by

\(^7\) In the episode involving Paul at Athens, it has been suggested that Luke portrayed the apostle as a philosophical figure whose oratory approach and content mirrored that of Socrates. For instance, the early Greek philosopher (469–399 BC) is said to have dialogued with various interlocutors in the central plaza of the city, introduced foreign deities, and espoused divergent teachings. Also, for these infractions, Socrates was put on trial and sentenced to death by the governing authority. It is beyond the scope of this essay to deliberate whether the data in scripture and elsewhere convincingly support the preceding view. For further information on this topic, cf. Barrett 1998:824, 828–9, 830; Bock 2007:562–3; Bruce 1988:329–40; Dunn 2009:683; Flemming 2002:209; Given 2001:4, 41–2, 56–9, 62–5, 67, 70, 76; Losie 2004:224–5; Marshall
revealing that he is also the Judge of earth’s inhabitants. It is for this reason that God summoned everyone to repent. Verse 31 puts a fine point on the declaration found in verses 26–28 that all humanity is totally reliant on God, by revealing that he would one day judge humanity through Jesus, whom the Lord raised from the dead.

3. Conceptual and Linguistic Parallels between the Song of Moses and Paul’s speech to the Athenians

The preceding section detailed possible literary parallels in the organizational schemes of the Song of Moses and Paul’s Speech to the Athenians. It may be conceded that, as suggestive as these similarities might be, in isolation they do not establish with certainty a strong connection between these two portions of scripture. In point of fact, it is at the conceptual and linguistic levels that the connection becomes clearer and confirms the major premise of this essay. Specifically, as the following discourse emphasizes, Paul connected his message to the Athenians with the theological perspective of the Song of Moses (and more broadly with that of the Tanakh). Accordingly, section 3.1 engages in an analysis of the Song of Moses. Then, section 3.2 examines Paul’s Speech to the Athenians. In doing so, the analysis draws upon the information in section 3.1 to call attention to the conceptual and linguistic parallels between the Song of Moses and Paul’s speech to the Athenians (technically referred to as ‘intertextual echoes’; Litwak 2004:199).8

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8 Due to the limitations of this study, only ‘scriptural intertexts in Paul’s speech’ (Litwak 2004:203)—in particular, the Song of Moses, and in general, the Tanakh—are considered.
3.1. An analysis of the Song of Moses

According to the organizational scheme for the Song of Moses adopted in section 2.2 of this essay, Deuteronomy 32:1–3 is God’s summoning of witnesses, specifically, the ‘heavens’ and the ‘earth’ (cf. Deut 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; Isa 1:2; 34:1; Mich 1:2; 6:1–2). This is paralleled in Deuteronomy 32:43 by God’s call for songs of praise from the ‘nations’ with (or concerning) his ‘people’ (cf. Rom 15:10). The correspondence between Deuteronomy 32:1–3 and verse 43 is even stronger in the Septuagint version of verse 43, which reads, ‘Rejoice, O heavens, with Him’. Then the verse adds, ‘Prostrate before Him, all you gods’.

The reason for the above response is given in verses 2–3. In particular, Moses’ soliloquy on the Creator’s just dealings with Israel and the nations was said to be as spiritually refreshing as a gentle rain on tender grass and nourishing as plentiful showers on newly sprouting plants. The equitable way in which God dealt with all humankind attested to the eminence of his ‘name’. ‘Lord’ translates the ‘four Hebrew consonants YHVH’ (Tigay 1996:431), which most likely was ‘pronounced Yahweh’. This ‘redemptive, covenant name’ (Wright 1996:300) pointed to the distinctive character and attributes of God—who alone is eternally ‘self-sufficient’ (von Rad 1966:199).

The sacred name also affirmed the ‘greatness’ (Deut 32:3) of the Creator’s divinity (cf. Exod 3:14–15; 33:19; 34:5–6; Deut 12:5, 11, 21; 14:23–24; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2; Ps. 105:1–2; Kaiser 1980:934; Ross 1997:147; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998:584–5). In comparison to Israel’s God, all the pagan deities venerated by people were powerless and lifeless idols (i.e. inanimate objects people made from such common elements as stone, metal, or wood). For this reason, God alone deserved to be worshipped. Deuteronomy 32:43 echoes this sentiment and adds that the divine Warrior would punish his adversaries
for shedding the ‘blood’ of his ‘servants’ (cf. 2 Kngs 9:7; Ps 79:10; Rev 6:10; 16:6; 18:20; 19:2). Likewise, he would vindicate their cause by making ‘atonement’ (Deut 32:43) for the Promised Land, as well as cleanse his people of their iniquities.

The preceding information indicates that the Song of Moses, while having liturgical and wisdom elements (cf. Driver 1986:345; Leuchter 2007:295; Weitzman 1994:377–8), is comparable to a covenant lawsuit oracle in which the Creator presented the evidence and rendered his verdict (cf. Chavalas 2003:577; Oswalt 2003:856; Thompson 1974:207). In this imaginary courtroom scene, God is depicted as the plaintiff and prosecuting attorney, the heavens and the earth are the jury, and the humankind is the accused (cf. Ps 50; Isa 1; Jer 2; Mich 6). On the one hand, Israel was guilty of violating the Mosaic covenant. On the other hand, the surrounding pagan nations were culpable for atrocities they committed against the covenant community. Whether it was the supreme Lord’s dealings with Israel (vv. 4–25) or the pagan nations (vv. 26–42), he remained just in his pronouncements and upright in his actions.

With respect to Israel, the nation’s disloyalty is summarised in verses 4–6. Throughout the Israelites’ existence, God proved himself to be their trustworthy and unfailing ‘Rock’ (i.e. source of refuge, protection, and strength; cf. Gen 49:24; Pss 18:2; 19:14; Baker 2003:365; Hill 1997:793; van der Woude 1997:1070). His deeds were characterized by integrity and truth, and all his actions were righteous and virtuous (cf. Deut 9:5; Pss 7:11; 36:7; 119:149; Isa 30:18). In contrast to the fidelity and equity the Creator displayed, his people behaved in a perverted manner toward him. This moral stain indicated they had repudiated being God’s ‘children’ (Deut 32:5; cf. Deut 14:1–2; Hos 1:9). Indeed, entire generations were characterized by perversion and duplicity.
It was inconceivable that the covenant community would respond to their Creator in such a ‘foolish’ (Deut 32:6) and senseless manner. After all, as their ‘Father’, he cared for, protected, and sustained them. The latter virtues were demonstrated in God’s redemption of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, establishing them as a nation, and settling them in the Promised Land (cf. Bray 2000:515–6; Oswalt 2003:854; Payne 1980:5). Deuteronomy 32:6 serves as an important reminder that the ‘fatherhood of God’ (Wright 1996:306) did not originate with the New Testament; instead, the concept has ‘deep roots in the relationship between God and Israel’ (cf. Exod 4:22; Isa 63:16; 64:8; Jer 3:19; 31:9; Hos 11:1; Mal 2:10).

Deuteronomy 32:7–14 provides more details concerning God’s loving actions on Israel’s behalf. This information further established the Creator’s integrity and rectitude, while at the same time confirmed Israel’s guilt in betraying his trust. The covenant community was directed to recall ‘days’ from long ago and deliberate on past ‘generations’. Younger persons were to seek understanding and insight from their elders concerning the ancient origins of the world, its inhabitants, and the nations that ruled over them. In this context, ‘Most High’ (Hebrew, Elyon, which occurs only here in Deuteronomy) depicts God as sitting enthroned high above his dominion. He is portrayed as the supreme potentate over the cosmos and the sovereign monarch of the earth (cf. Gen 14:18–22; Num 24:16; Pss 18:13; 21:7; 78:17, 35, 56; 82:6; 91:1; 92:1; Baker 2003:361; Carr 1980:669; Zobel 2001:124–5).

Deuteronomy 32:8 (along with the entire Song of Moses) reflects an ancient Hebrew conception of the universe in which God’s people divided the world into heaven, earth, sea, and the underworld (cf. Ps 82:5; Prov 8:29; Isa 24:18; Haarsma and Haarsma 2007:112–5; Lioy 2011:42; Walton 2009:12–3). More specifically, they visualized the
earth as being a flat, disc-shaped landmass that was completely surrounded by water. Pillars supported the ground, while mountains located on the distant horizon upheld the sky. The sky itself was thought to be a solid dome or tent-like structure on which the celestial bodies (namely, the sun, moon, and stars) were engraved and moved in tracks. In this ancient three-tiered view of the cosmos, rain, hail, and snow (from an immense body of water located above the overarching sky) fell to earth through openings. God’s temple was situated in the upper heavens, which in turn rested atop the sky (or lower heavens). The Jerusalem temple was the earthbound counterpart to the divine abode. The realm of the dead was considered a grimy and watery region located beneath the earth and called the underworld (or Sheol).

Deuteronomy 32:8 draws attention to the Creator’s goodness and graciousness to all humankind. For instance, after he brought the human race into existence, God divided up the ‘nations’ and allocated their dominions. He also separated groups of Adam’s descendants from one another and established their geographical boundaries (cf. the Tower of Babel incident in Gen 11:1–9). Apparently, the Lord did so with Israel in mind, that is, in conjunction with his plans and purposes for his chosen people. Whereas the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 32:8 reads the ‘sons of Israel’, the Septuagint has the ‘angels of God’ and the Dead Sea Scrolls read ‘sons of God’ (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1; Ps 82:6; Jacob 1958:218; McConville 2002:448; Smith 1993:230, 287; Thompson 1974:299). Perhaps in these variant readings, the idea is that the Creator made different members of his heavenly assembly (or divine council) responsible for the oversight of particular nations (cf. Pss 82:1; 89:5–7; Dan 10:13–21; 12:1). In contrast, as Deuteronomy 32:9 reveals, the Lord made his chosen people—collectively referred to as ‘Jacob’ (cf. Num 23:7, 10, 21, 23; 24:5, 17–19)—his special allotment and prized

Deuteronomy 32:10–14 further specifies how God cared for the Israelites, especially after liberating them from their Egyptian tyrants. Through the episode involving the ten plagues, the Creator demonstrated his utter superiority over the pantheon of deities venerated by Pharaoh and his subordinates. After Israel’s emancipation, the subsequent place of the nation’s sojourn—the Sinai desert—is depicted as a barren wilderness filled with ‘howling’ winds and predators. Over the next four decades, the Creator repeatedly surrounded his people with his presence and watched over them as the ‘pupil of his eye’. According to one view, this Hebrew idiom refers to the most precious and fragile aspect of the eye, which required safeguarding in order to preserve one’s ability to see. According to another view, the phrase denotes the movement of the pupil, which was associated with being alert and attentive. In either case, the emphasis is on the provision of protection, such as that which God graciously provided for Israel (cf. Barabas 2009:266; Harrison 1980:215; Kalland 1992:204; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998:256; Tigay 1996:304).

The Creator not only safeguarded his people, but also abundantly provided for them. Deuteronomy 32:11 and 12 compare God to an ‘eagle’ that stirred up its ‘nest’ and hovered closely over its ‘young’ (cf. Exod 19:4). The adult birds of prey regularly ‘spread out’ (Deut 32:11) their ‘wings’, caught their nestlings, and used their ‘pinions’ to lift up their young. In a similar way, the Lord alone upheld and guided his people. Indeed, it was only he who watched over and led them during their time in the wilderness. No assortment of pagan deities (such as those venerated by the nations of the ancient Near East) accompanied or
assisted God in bringing the Israelites to the Promised Land (v. 12; cf. Deut 5:6–7; Hos 13:4).

According to Deuteronomy 32:13 and 14, the Creator alone enabled his people to traverse the elevated portions of Canaan and enjoy the crops the land produced. Moreover, it was only the Lord who provided the Israelites with ‘honey’ from the surface of the rocks and olive ‘oil’ from the stony crags (cf. Exod 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev 20:24; Num 14:8; Deut 6:3; Ps 81:16). Likewise, the supreme and unique God enabled the covenant community to enjoy ‘curds’ (Deut 32:14) obtained from herds of cattle and ‘milk’ from flocks of sheep. As well, it was the Lord, not the pantheon of gods and goddesses belonging to the surrounding nations, that gave Israel the means to savour the finest part of young ‘lambs’, stout ‘rams’ from Bashan (a fertile locale on the east side on the upper Jordan River; cf. Deut. 3:1–11; Amos 4:1; Huey 2009:521; LaSor 1980:436; Slayton 1992:623), along with goats, the healthiest kernels of wheat (literally, ‘fat of the kidneys of wheat’), and fermented, blood-red wine made from the choicest grapes.

God’s loving actions on Israel’s behalf, as detailed in Deuteronomy 32:7–14, made his indictment of the nation’s rebellion, as specified in verses 15–18, all the more stark. Israel is symbolically referred to ‘Jeshurun’, a Hebrew noun that literally means ‘upright one’, and draws to mind the reference in verse 4 to God as being ‘upright’. Indeed, the underlying Hebrew terms are lexically related (yeshurun and yashar, respectively; cf. Baker 2003:361; Driver 1986:361; Knauth 2003:454; Wiseman 1980:418). Yet, ironically, what was true of the Lord did not apply to his people, who became perverted in their moral and spiritual character.

God’s goodness enabled the nation, like a well-fed animal, to grow fat and bloated. Tragically, the Israelites reciprocated by obstinately
kicking against God’s will, thrusting aside any covenantal allegiance to their Creator, and despising the ‘Rock’ (vv. 4, 15) who brought about their deliverance. Moreover, the Israelites’ veneration of pagan deities, along with their participation in abhorrent rituals (including shrine prostitution, child sacrifice, and so on), incited the Lord to jealous anger (v. 16; cf. Num 25:11; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 6:15). They made sacrifices to demons, not to God (cf. Lev 17:7; Ps 106:37; 1 Cor 10:20). These were malevolent spiritual entities, whom the Israelites never knew, especially in the way they had experienced the Creator’s overflowing and constant provision (cf. Carpenter 2009:518; Hadley 1997:715; Merrill 2003:517). Furthermore, the people prostrated themselves before newly concocted idols (i.e. ‘deities-come-lately’; Christensen 2002:806), which the nation’s ancestors had never dreaded (Deut 32:17). In summary, the Israelites disregarded the one who, like a nurturing mother (cf. Isa 66:13), brought them into existence, and became oblivious to the one who graciously sustained them (Deut 32:18).

Israel’s rebellion, as delineated in verses 15–18, vindicated God’s decision to punish the nation, as described in verses 19–25. There is an element of ironic justice at work. Specifically, just as the Israelites had despised and abandoned their Creator, so too he ‘spurned’ them. This did not mean he ignored the detestable behaviour of his spiritual children. Instead, in an appropriate response, their Rock hid his ‘face’ from them, which figuratively means he withdrew his protective, sustaining presence (cf. Rom 1:24, 26, 28). A disastrous outcome resulted as the nation experienced seemingly nonstop natural disasters and war. In keeping with the Lord’s accusation in Deuteronomy 32:5, he declared in verse 20 that on-going generations of Israelites were characterised by moral perversion and disloyalty.
Verses 21–25 delineate the consequences of the nation’s violations of the covenant detailed earlier in the Song of Moses. For instance, they enraged their Creator by venerating powerless, lifeless ‘idols’. The latter renders the Hebrew noun *hevel*, which literally means ‘empty things’ or ‘things of a mere breath’ (cf. Pss 39:5–6; 62:9; Eccl 1:1; 12:8; Isa 57:13; Albertz 1997:1:351–3; Johnston 1997: 1003–5; Seybold 1997:3:313–20). In turn, God pledged to vex Israel by permitting unknown foreigners to overrun the nation (cf. Rom 10:19). These foes were thoroughly pagan and seemingly foolish (yet ruthless) in their demeanour. The Lord’s righteous indignation was comparable to an inferno that penetrated the depths of *Sheol*, devoured whatever the earth produced, and incinerated the planet’s ‘mountains’ (Deut 32:22) to their ‘foundations’.

The divine Warrior promised to overwhelm his people with ‘calamities’ (v. 23), and, like a hunter, exterminate them with his ‘arrows’ (cf. the covenant curses detailed in Lev 26:14–39 and Deut 28:15–68). Malnutrition brought on by ‘famine’ (Deut 32:24) would emaciate the idolatrous Israelites, and disease would devour and destroy them. God would permit the fangs of wild animals to attack his people, and he would let venomous snakes poison individuals. Foreigner invaders would slaughter many Israelites in their towns and farms, as well as terrorize the nation’s inhabitants within their residences. All echelons of society would be imperilled—whether young or old, single persons or parents (v. 25).

Even though the Creator would use pagan foes to afflict his wayward people, verses 26–42 indicate that he would not allow the aggressors to act with impunity. For instance, in verses 26–31, God censured Israel’s enemies for their relentless brutality. Without the Lord’s restraint, the antagonists would have massacred so many Israelites that the surrounding nations would no longer remember that God’s people once
existed. Whereas the Hebrew text reads, ‘I will cut them to pieces’, the Septuagint says, ‘I would scatter them abroad’. Both renderings draw attention to how extensively Israel’s existence was threatened by the devastation brought by cruel adversaries.

If the Lord had allowed the Israelites to be completely exterminated, his reputation would have been jeopardized by the deriding comments their enemies made (cf. Deut 9:28; 1 Sam 12:22; Ezek 36:21–38). The oppressors would delude themselves into thinking that their military strength was entirely responsible for their victory over God’s people. Such a false conclusion indicated that the foes were devoid of prudence and discernment (Deut 32:28). Because Israel’s adversaries were bereft of God-given wisdom, they failed to recognize his hand in their victory and in their demise (v. 29). A relatively small number of antagonists were overwhelmingly triumphant over God’s people because their ‘Rock’ (v. 30) had withdrawn his protective presence. In this regard, their foes conceded that the purposes and plans of Israel’s God differed radically from the pagan deities venerated by the surrounding nations (v. 31).

God’s censure of Israel’s opponents was warranted (vv. 26–31) and it justified his decision to punish the antagonists (vv. 32–35). After all, they planted their roots in the depraved soil that previously characterised the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen 13:10–13; 18–19; Deut 29:23; Isa 1:10; 3:9; Jer 23:14; Lam 4:6; Ezek 16:44–52; Matt 10:15; 11:23–24). The resulting harvest was like snake’s ‘poison’ (Deut 32:33) and a cobra’s deadly ‘venom’. Similarly, the corresponding fruit would be the bitter experience of the Creator’s judgment. Israel’s enemies failed to understand that the Lord remained sovereign in deciding either victory or defeat for the nations of the earth. Whatever fate lay in store for them rested entirely with the
Creator (v. 34). Indeed, ‘vengeance’ (v. 35; or ‘vindication’) and ‘recompense’ belonged exclusively to him (cf. Ps 135:14; Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30). (In Deut 32:35, the Septuagint alternately reads, ‘I will repay’, which does not change the essential meaning of the passage.) The surefootedness of Israel’s foes was temporary. The divine Warrior declared that at the appointed time, ‘calamity’ would overtake the antagonists. No matter how hard they tried, they could not avert the swift approach of their impending ‘doom’.

By punishing Israel’s opponents (vv. 32–35), God would vindicate his people (vv. 36–38). In turn, the Creator would render a favourable verdict on behalf of his beleaguered children. With the wiping out of both slave and free persons among the Israelites, their ability to defend themselves would vanish. So, in a display of compassion, the Lord would relent from permitting the wholesale slaughter of his ‘servants’ (cf. Ps 135:14). In that moment of deliverance, the one, true, and living God would ask concerning the whereabouts of the pagan deities his people previously fled to for protection (Deut 32:37). These were the idols the Israelites foolishly venerated in ritualistic practices. With a tone of sarcasm, the Lord urged his people to verify whether these false gods and goddesses could really shelter the Israelites from their adversities (v. 38). The nation’s experience would prove that God alone was their source of refuge and strength.

Once the Creator brought his punishment of Israel to an end (vv. 19–25), he would complete his execution of justice by trouncing the nation’s antagonists and the pantheon of deities they revered (vv. 39–42). He alone could bring all this about, for only he was the self-existent Lord of the cosmos (cf. Exod 3:14–15; 15:11; Deut 4:35, 39; Ps 113:4–6; Isa 41:4; 43:10, 13; 44:6; 45:6–7, 21–22; 48:12). None of the idols venerated by the nations of the world could make this claim. Likewise, there were no gods and goddesses of the ancient Near East
who could challenge the Lord’s assertion to be the sole source of death and life. He alone overturned nations and restored peoples, and not a single entity could snatch itself out of his omnipotent ‘hand’ (Deut 32:40) of judgment.

Verse 40 metaphorically depicts the Creator raising up his ‘hand to heaven’ and making a solemn oath as the eternal Lord (cf. Gen. 14:22; Exod 6:8; Num 14:21, 28, 30; Ps 90:2; Isa 49:18; Jer 22:24; Ezek 5:11). He vowed to seize his gleaming ‘sword’ (Deut 32:41) and make it razor sharp. Then, as he clasped his instrument of ‘judgment’, he would bring retribution on his opponents. The divine Warrior would repay the tyrants for cruelly oppressing his people. He would satiate his ‘arrows’ (v. 42) with the ‘blood’ of his foes, and he would use his ‘sword’ to consume his enemies. A grisly scene is depicted in which God’s instrument of justice adversely struck the enemies’ highest-ranking combatants (who possibly grew their hair long to signal religious devotion or to appear more fearsome to their foes; cf. Num 6:1–21; Judg 13:1–5; 16:17; Ps 68:21), along with the slaughtered and captured in battle (cf. Clements 1998:528; Kalland 1992:215; Keil and Delitzsch 1981:491; McConville 2002:450; Miller 1990:233; Thompson 1974: 303).

3.2. An analysis of Paul’s speech to the Athenians

The intent here, as noted in section 3, is to examine Paul’s speech to the Athenians. This treatise, which is characterised by apologetic, philosophical, and juridical elements (cf. Alexander 2006:197; Barrett 1998:825–6; Fitzmyer 1998:601), calls attention to the ‘universal scope of God’s saving work’ (Tannehill 1994:210; cf. Luke 2:30–32; 3:6; Acts 26:17–18, 23). As the upcoming analysis is undertaken, it draws upon the information in section 3.1 to call attention to the conceptual and linguistic parallels between Paul’s speech and the Song of Moses
(and more broadly with that of the Tanakh). In keeping with the approach adopted in section 3.1, the assessment presented below follows the organisational scheme for Paul’s speech appearing in section 2.2.

Accordingly, Acts 17:16–17, as the prologue to the apostle’s oration, provide the context for his discourse with people in Athens. Paul had time on his hands, since he was waiting for Silas and Timothy to depart from Berea and rejoin the apostle (v. 14). As Paul progressively made his way through Athens, he focused his attention on the multitude of graven images scattered throughout the pagan shrines in the city. The language of verse 16 evokes the ‘image of a forest of idols’ (Wall 2002:244). It did not take long for the apostle to become exasperated by what he saw and to formulate a ‘prophetic anti-idol polemic’ (Litwak 2004:2002) in response to his interlocutors at Athens.

The imperfect passive indicative tense of the Greek verb *paroxynō* indicates that Paul’s agitation was ongoing, especially as he encountered one idol after another (cf. Polhill 1992:366; Reese 1976:621; Witherington 1998:512). Correspondingly, the apostle took every opportunity he could get (cf. the imperfect middle indicative tense of the verb *dialegomai*) to discourse with a variety of different groups (cf. Rogers and Rogers 1998:274; Peterson 2009:489; Schnabel 2012:724). This included Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (i.e. devout non-Jews who worshipped the God of Israel and attempted to keep the Mosaic Law), both of whom congregated in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Paul also deliberated with the patrons he encountered in the marketplace of Athens (including the Roman Forum and the Greek Agora) from one day to the next (v. 17; Arnold 2002:386; Evans 2004:117; Schnabel 2005:172–3). As the ‘main public space in the city’ (Gill 1994:445), the downtown plaza was the ‘economic, political and cultural heart’ for the residents of Athens.
A superficial scan of the prologue might leave readers with the incorrect impression that, for the most part, the apostle’s time in Athens was unprofitable. Yet, an entirely different conclusion arises from an examination of the epilogue in verses 33–34. Admittedly, on the one hand, despite Paul’s efforts to share the truth of the gospel, it did not result in droves of converts. Still, on the other hand, even as the apostle exited from the Areopagus (v. 33), a modest number of new believers accompanied him (v. 34). Of particular note were such converts as Dionysius, who was a member of the council, along with a woman named Damaris and a few other unnamed individuals. ‘Areopagus’ literally means ‘Hill of Ares’, and it was where the Athenian Council met to decide ethical, cultural, and religious matters. Ares was the Greek god of war and thunder. Ares was analogous to Mars in the Roman pantheon; hence, the alternative name for the site of ‘Mars’ Hill’ (cf. Gempf 1993:51–2; Martin 1992:370; Rupprecht 2009:337).

Verses 18–21 state why Paul gave a speech to the members of the Athenian Council. The apostle had caught the attention of some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, among whom he dialogued and debated the truths of the gospel. Carson (2000:390) notes that there were ‘other Greek and Latin worldviews’ in vogue during the lifetime of Paul. For instance, Acts 17 does not draw attention to either the ‘sophists’ or the ‘atheistic philosophical materialists’. Regardless, the apostle endeavoured to proclaim the gospel to people ‘deeply committed to one fundamentally alien worldview or another’. More generally, Paul’s address ‘reflects Stoic ideas about God’ (Neyrey 1990); yet, even then, the apostle’s oration charts a rigorously biblical course by focusing its ‘narrative logic’ on ‘God’s providential action in the world’ (a theocentric emphasis) and the ‘role of Jesus as Judge’ over all humankind (a Christotelic emphasis).
In brief, the Epicureans were materialists who valued sense-experience and mental repose. They also spurned the notion of a bodily resurrection, considered organised religion to be the source of all evils, and regarded pleasure (especially the absence of pain and anxiety) as the chief aim of life. Like the Epicureans, the Stoics rejected the idea of a bodily resurrection. Adherents also embraced a deterministic, pantheistic worldview, as well as emphasised the value of logic (particularly universal reason or the *logos*), an empirical understanding of knowledge, and the importance of virtue coupled with duty. Whereas Epicureans believed that death was the end of all existence, Stoics were convinced that at death the eternal soul disengaged from the temporal body and was united with the divine. While the account in Acts ‘singles out the Stoics and Epicureans for special mention’ (Wilson 1973:196), these two philosophical views are representative of a ‘wider reality’ that was prevalent in Greece.

Some regarded Paul as an ignorant forager of confused and incoherent notions, while others were wary of the alien spiritual entities he seemed to be hawking: for example, a male deity named ‘Jesus’ (a masculine noun in Greek) and a female deity/consort named ‘Resurrection’ (based on the underlying feminine Greek noun, *anastasis*; cf. Brown 1986:261; Flemming 2002:200; Gempf 1993:52; Martin 1992:52; Witherington 1998:515). These disparaging attitudes, which conveyed ‘intellectual contempt’ (Jipp 2012:571), resulted from hearing the apostle proclaim the truth about the Messiah, particularly his rising from the dead (v. 18). The intense curiosity of the intelligentsia prompted a group of them to take Paul into custody and escort him to the Areopagus. There, in response to their interrogation, he spoke at length about the ‘new

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teaching’ (v. 19) the elitists heard him proclaiming. Because the philosophers found the apostle’s notions both unfamiliar and startling, they wanted him to explain the meaning and significance of his discourse (v. 20). This interest reflected the common practice among resident Athenians and foreigners to the city of idling their time away by exchanging new and novel ideas with one another (v. 21).

For the preceding reason, the council assembled to pass judgment on Paul’s religious ideas. Ironically, his speech would reveal that it was the elitists who were guilty of adhering to a mishmash of chaotic and jumbled thoughts. The apostle began his oration by collectively referring to his listeners as ‘men of Athens’ (v. 22). This statement reflects the predominately patriarchal nature of Hellenistic culture. Nonetheless, as verse 34 indicates, there were at least a few women in the gathering, including a convert named Damaris (cf. Peterson 2009:504; Schnabel 2012:743; Witherington 1998:532–3). Presumably, the size of the Athenian audience with whom Paul discoursed—while standing in the midst of the Areopagus—was diminutive in comparison to the number of Israelites whom Moses addressed toward the end of his life (v. 22). Nonetheless, based on the strong, mixed response Paul received, as described in verse 32, what he declared was just as substantive and no less provocative. This is to be expected, since, in keeping with the major claim of this essay, and as the following assessment indicates, the apostle’s remarks drew upon the monotheistic outlook of the Song of Moses.

Paul astutely used the time he had spent in discourse with the people of Athens (cf. vv. 16–17). He discerned that in every conceivable way, his listeners were extremely ‘religious’ (v. 22). The apostle’s opening statement is technically referred in Greco-Roman rhetoric as captatio benevolentiae, a Latin expression that generally means ‘an attempt to
establish goodwill’ (cf. Charles 1995:54; Majercik 1992:711; Winter 1993:821; Zweck 1989:100). On the one hand, Paul was complimenting his listeners for their piety (cf. Alexander 2006:197; Walaskay 1998:166; Wallace 1996:300–1). On the other hand, as verse 23 indicates, Paul also drew attention to their spiritual ignorance and superstition. The paradox is that even though the members of the intelligentsia considered themselves to be enlightened and sagacious, they were ignorant of and failed to discern God’s true nature. There is also an ironic reversal of roles, in which it was the beliefs of the Athenian elitists, not just that of the apostle, which were under scrutiny.

As noted in section 3.1, the Song of Moses is analogous to a covenant lawsuit oracle in which the Creator, after presenting his evidence against Israel and the nation’s foes, announced his verdict. Correspondingly, Paul’s soliloquy to the Athenians evaluates their beliefs, priorities, and practices and renders the divine verdict of guilt. During the apostle’s excursion through the city, he looked attentively at the objects representing the idols the people venerated. Paul found especially noteworthy an elevated platform on which was engraved the epigraph, ‘to an unknown God’ (v. 23). The implication is that the altar was dedicated to any deity the devout Athenians had failed to consider. The motivation for doing so was their fear of offending some overlooked deity.

The apostle made the preceding altar an appropriate starting point for the main proposition of his discourse (referred to in rhetoric as a proposition; cf. Charles 1995:56; Majercik 1992:711; Winter 1993:821; Zweck 1989:100). Paul recognised that the worldview of his Hellenistic audience was characterised by dualism, pantheism, and polytheism. In part, his evangelistic ‘strategy’ (Muñoz-Larrondo 2012:200) involved ‘mimicry’, that is, ‘appropriating the message of the philosophers’ to draw attention to the truth about Jesus. On the one hand, the apostle
used the ‘intellectual, philosophical and linguistic traditions of his audience’ (Schnabel 2005:184) to create a ‘bridgehead for the proclamation’ of the gospel. On the other hand, even though Paul avoided saturating his oration with Old Testament quotations, the speech remained thoroughly grounded in the biblical mindset of the Song of Moses. This includes the scriptural truth of God’s ‘incomprehensibility’ (Gerrish 1973:265) apart from special revelation (cf. Ps 18:11; Isa 45:15; 1 Tim 6:16).

In Acts 17:23, the apostle stated that he would disclose what his audience, in their ‘ignorance’, tried to revere. Put another way, Paul would make known to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (among other elitists) what they failed to recognise and comprehend. The apostle would do so by pointing them to the Messiah, who as the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Son of God, made the Creator fully known (cf. John 1:1–2, 14, 18; 14:6–7; Gerrish 1973:266). As the Song of Moses reveals, the so-called ‘unknown’ deity was also the only true and living God (Deut 32:39). Both the Israelites and their foes were spiritually deficient in their understanding of his nature. For instance, the Israelites’ perversion and duplicity—including their idolatrous practices (v. 5)—pointed to their foolishness and imprudence. Israel’s enemies were even more steeped in spiritual darkness (v. 26), and utterly lacked any understanding of the Creator and his ways (vv. 28–29).

In Paul’s speech, he used the tension arising from the Athenians’ ignorance of God (Acts 17:22–23) to emphasise the world’s absolute dependence on him (vv. 24–25). The apostle began by stating that God is the Creator, namely, the one who brought the entire ‘universe’ (Greek, cόσμος) into existence, along with all that it contains (whether animate or inanimate, material or spiritual; cf. Gen 1–2; 14:19, 22; Isa
According to Paul, God was neither an absent deity nor a peevish demiurge; instead, the Creator was the supreme ‘Lord’ (Acts 17:24) of the celestial heights above (including its objects) and the earth below (including whatever was on it; cf. Exod 20:11; Matt 11:25). The implication is that God was the moral governor of the universe. In a comparable way, the Song of Moses emphasised the sovereignty of the Lord. The passage reveals that the ‘Most High’ (Deut 32:8) is also the ‘Creator’ (v. 6). Furthermore, he is characterised by ‘greatness’ (v. 3), faithfulness, integrity, and equity (v. 4). For these reasons, he could legitimately claim to have the authority to vindicate Israel and vanquish the nation’s foes (vv. 36, 43).

Paul advanced his argument by noting that the supreme Lord and Judge transcended creation. For this reason, he did not dwell in humanly constructed shrines, such as the Parthenon, which was dedicated to Athena, the patron goddess of the city. The massive structure, with its Doric columns and statue of Athena, could easily be seen from the Areopagus (Acts 17:24; cf. 1 Kgs 8:27; Isa 66:1–2; Acts 7:48; Hemer 1989:118; Martin 1992:517; McRay 2000:139; Schnabel 2005:173–4; Stonehouse 1949:10). Similarly, the apostle noted, the Creator did not need people to wait on him or make sacrifices to him, for he did not require anything from his creatures for his survival and satisfaction (cf. 1 Chron 29:14; Ps 50:7–15). In reality, every entity throughout the entire cosmos depended on God for its existence (Acts 17:25; cf. Isa 42:5; Matt 6:25–34). Paul’s observations reflect the theological orientation of the Song of Moses. It reveals that the Lord was Israel’s ‘Rock’ (Deut 32:4), the one who brought about their existence (vv. 6, 9). This same God established all the nations of the world and fixed the boundaries for the benefit of their inhabitants (v. 8).

The apostle further refined his argument by claiming that along with creation (in general; Acts 17:24–25), humankind (in particular) was
totally reliant on God (vv. 26–28). The Greek text of verse 26 literally reads ‘from (or out of) one’. Because the latter is a genitive of source or origin, it most likely refers to biological descent from a common ancestor (cf. Gärtner 1955:229; Rogers and Rogers 1998:276; Schnabel 2012:734). So, the passage is best understood to mean ‘from one man’, namely, Adam. It is conceded that some Greek manuscripts read ‘from one blood’; even so, it does not alter the ‘passage’s meaning, which still alludes to Adam’ (Bock 2007:574). Likewise, this interpretive thrust is consistent with ‘Greek philosophical thinking about the one and the many’ (Fitzmyer 1998:609).

The implication is that Paul not only affirmed the historicity of Adam, but also his status as the biological progenitor (along with Eve) of the entire human race (cf. Luke 3:38; Rom 5:12, 15–17; 1 Cor 15:21–22, 45–49; Bruce 1988:332, 337; Marshall 1980:287; Polhill 1992:374; Reese 1976:629). The apostle declared that from this first human pair not only did all the nations arise, but also they spread throughout the entire planet. In turn, Paul disclosed that the transcendent Creator marked out the boundaries of the nations’ set times (or historical eras) and the borders of their respective territories. These facts accorded with the Torah, which teaches that in the distant past, God specially created Adam and Eve (cf. Gen 2:7, 21–23); and from them, the rest of the human race is biologically descended (cf. 1:26–27; 3:20). Likewise, the Song of Moses clearly affirms these same biblical truths (Deut 32:6, 8; cf. Ps 74:17; Dan 2:36–45).

Paul explained to the intelligentsia in Athens that the Creator graciously provided for humankind with the intent that people would somehow search after God, along with the uncertain hope of coming to know and worship him (cf. Ps 14:2; Prov 8:17; Isa 55:6; 65:1; Jer 29:13). The apostle compared the process to the unsaved feeling around in the dark
for clues about God’s existence, even though in their fallen state they were unable to alight upon anything informative. Paul noted that the Creator, though transcendent, was actively involved in human history and not far removed from each human being (Acts 17:27; cf. Ps 145:18; Jer 23:23–24). This declaration is affirmed in Deuteronomy 4:7, which revealed that the Lord remained imminent among his chosen people. Similarly, the Song of Moses asserted that from the earliest days of the Israelites’ existence, God safeguarded, preserved, and sustained them (32:10–14), as well as the rest of humanity (cf. Matt 5:45; Luke 6:35).

Paul substantiated his point by quoting from a poem to Zeus titled *Cretica*, which says, ‘For in you we live and move and have our being’. The ode was authored by Epimenides, a poet-philosopher and seer from Crete who lived around 600 BC. In the Greek pantheon, Zeus was the supreme god, who allegedly ruled and watched over humankind, as well as meted out evil and good (cf. Bruce 1988:338; Charles 1995:58; Walaskay 1998:165). In citing this poem, the apostle’s objective was not to express a ‘philosophico-pantheistic bias’ (Gärtner 1955:186), but to present ‘authentic Judaism made universal through Jesus, the Messiah’ (Mauck 2001:131). Accordingly, Paul clarified that it was the true and living God who graciously gave to every person the ability to exist, to journey through life, and to be productive members of society (cf. Erickson 1998:329, 562; Given 2001:50; Horton 2011:231, 233, 244, 248, 261, 264–5, 310, 312, 351).

Next, the apostle quoted from *Phaenomena*, 5, which was a Greek document written by a Cilician Stoic poet named Aratus (c. 315–240 BC). The same quote is also found in the *Hymn to Zeus*, 4, which was penned by Cleanthes (c. 331–233 BC; cf. Bock 2007:567; Wall 2002:247; Longenecker 1981:476). Paul’s citation of these pagan sources did not mean he thought they were divinely inspired; instead, the apostle simply regarded the observations they made to be fitting
illustrations of specific eternal truths revealed in God’s Word. Acts 17:28 restates the preceding passage as follows: ‘For we also are his offspring’. This assertion echoes the revelation in Genesis 1:26–28 of people being made in the image of God. The quote also conceptually aligns with the Song of Moses, which states that the ‘Most High’ (Deut 32:8) was responsible for giving each nation its land, establishing its boundaries, and enabling it to become populous and prosperous.

The apostle revealed that even though religiously inclined pagans strove to discover and worship the Creator (Acts 17:27), they always failed in their efforts, because they were steeped in spiritual darkness. No matter how hard the unregenerate tried, they were unable to grasp the incomparable nature of God (v. 29). Paul’s statements reflect the theological orientation of the Song of Moses. The ode portrayed the Creator as being praiseworthy due to his ‘greatness’ (Deut 32:3), steadfastness, faithfulness, and integrity (v. 4). He alone, as Israel’s ‘Rock’, was the ‘Most High’ (v. 8). Only he could bring his chosen people into existence (v. 18), as well as guide and protect them (v. 12). More generally, no one except the Creator was eternally self-existent, along with being the ultimate source of life, death, and salvation (v. 39).

In his speech to the Athenians, Paul joined the truth of God’s incomparable nature with the fact that all humankind, through Adam and Eve (cf. Acts 17:26), were the Creator’s ‘offspring’ (v. 29). The apostle reasoned that it was irrational to suppose that the ‘nature’ of God was comparable to such common earthly substances as ‘gold or silver or stone’ (cf. Deut 5:8; Ps 115:2–8; Isa 37:19; 44:9–20). Paradoxically, unsaved artisans leveraged their God-given ‘skill and imagination’ (Acts 17:29) to use each of these inanimate elements (as well as ‘marble, wood, bronze, ivory, and terra-cotta’; Schnabel 2012:737) to make sculpted figures. Yet, as the Song of Moses
disclosed, the resulting idols venerated by the pagans were powerless and lifeless (Deut 32:21). Despite the Israelites’ infatuation with a cadre of these false gods and goddesses, they did not lead God’s children out of Egypt (v. 12) and nourish them for 40 years in the Sinai desert (vv. 13–14). Furthermore, the chosen people aroused the divine Warrior’s indignation by offering sacrifices to abominations (vv. 16–17).

In light of the idolatry all humankind was guilty of committing—including the Athenian intelligentsia listening to Paul—the apostle declared the divine summons for his listeners to ‘repent’ (Acts 17:30). The underlying Greek verb refers to a change in one’s way of life—including one’s thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and actions—as a result of coming to terms with the reality of sin and God’s gracious provision of righteousness (cf. Isa 59:20; Jer 15:19; Ezek 14:6; 18:30, 32; Matt 3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38; 3:19; Fitzmyer 1998:265; Louw and Nida 1989:510; Merklein 1991:416; Spicq 1994:475). Even though the apostle’s listeners thought they were placing him under the searing scrutiny of their evaluation, in fact they were the ones whom the Creator had placed on trial.

Moreover, while the elitists in the city regarded themselves as being sophisticated and enlightened, Paul referred to the ark of human history since the time of Adam and Eve as the ‘era of ignorance’ (Acts 17:30). A similar perspective is conveyed in the Song of Moses. For instance, the soliloquy refers to the idolatrous Israelites as people who were ‘foolish’ (Deut 17:6) and ‘imprudent’. Likewise, Israel’s pagan neighbours were described as people void of spiritual insight and discernment (v. 21). In Paul’s oration, he revealed that the Creator could have wiped out his ‘offspring’ (Acts 17:29) at any time for their idolatry; yet he purposefully disregarded their transgressions for a season. It was his intent to forestall punishment temporarily so that, at the divinely appointed time at Calvary, he could make his Son the
atoning sacrifice for humankind’s iniquities (cf. Acts 14:16; Rom 3:25–26). Paul announced that with the advent of the Messiah, a new era had dawned for the human race. God extended to people everywhere an opportunity to be reconciled to him (cf. Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:20).

While the sophists in Athens might baulk at the notion of repenting, Paul deliberately stressed the reality of a future judgment of humanity (Acts 17:31). Indeed, the certitude of the Creator holding everyone accountable for their actions prompted the apostle to risk being ostracised by focusing his listeners’ attention on the future day of judgment. Paul asserted that God had chosen a day known only to him when he would assess all humankind according to the benchmark of his righteous moral standard (cf. Pss 9:8; 96:13; 98:9; Isa 66:16; Jer 25:31; Matt 11:22, 24; 12:36). This emphasis on the Lord’s inherent authority to evaluate his children finds its theological foundation in the Song of Moses. Specifically, as Deuteronomy 32:4 reveals, God is characterised by integrity, all his actions are upright, and there is no trace of iniquity in him.

In light of the negative response Paul had already experienced from his Epicurean and Stoic interlocutors, he was well aware of their belief that death was final and permanent (cf. Acts 17:18). Nonetheless, the apostle remained undeterred in focusing the Athenians’ attention on the Lord Jesus, who was the ‘key figure in God’s plan for humanity’ (Peterson 2009:503). Indeed, the Creator had chosen and commissioned the Messiah to be the divinely appointed agent of judgment (cf. Dan 7:13–14; Matt 25:31–46; John 5:21–23, 27, 30; Acts 2:30–36; 10:42; Rev 20:12–15). The confirmation of this truth was that God raised the Saviour from the dead (Acts 17:31; cf. 2:24, 32). Even though Jesus came to earth as a helpless infant, and as an adult died on the cross, God resurrected him and in doing so confirmed his status as the ‘Son of
God’ (cf. Rom 1:4). The Lord intended the reality of this historical event to move the lost to trust in the Redeemer and thereby experience deliverance on the Day of Judgment. This theological orientation is woven tightly into the literary fabric of the Song of Moses. In particular, the divine Warrior promised to ‘vindicate His people’ (Deut 32:36) and ‘take vengeance’ (v. 41) on his foes. The latter included making ‘atonement’ (v. 43) for God’s chosen people and the Promised Land.

4. Conclusion

This essay has undertaken a comparative analysis of the Song of Moses and Paul’s speech to the Athenians. The motivation for doing so concerns the seemingly unconventional way in which Paul addressed the Greek intelligentsia at the Areopagus. On the one hand, the apostle did not fill his oration with direct quotes from the Old Testament. On the other hand, he directly quoted from several Greek poets. One legitimate concern, then, is whether Paul overly diluted his proclamation of the gospel to accommodate the proclivities of his pagan (gentile) audience.

The investigation put forward in this treatise indicates that at a literary, conceptual, and linguistic level, Paul connected the theological perspective of the Song of Moses with his message to the Athenians. It may be conceded that the worldview of his Hellenistic listeners was characterised by dualism, pantheism, and polytheism; yet, even though the apostle avoided saturating his oration with direct Old Testament quotations, the speech remained thoroughly grounded in the biblical mind-set of the Song of Moses (and more broadly with that of the Tanakh).
Suggestive in this regard is the literary comparison broached in section 2 concerning the organizational scheme of the Song of Moses and Paul’s speech to the Athenians. Due to the fact that there is no scholarly consensus about the best way to arrange these passages, it was decided in this essay to take a fresh approach. As the discourse in sections 2.1 and 2.2 points out, there are intriguing parallels that draw attention to the close literary connection between the Song of Moses and Paul’s speech to the Athenians. It was acknowledged that as suggestive as the similarities might be, in isolation they do not establish with certainty a strong connection between these two portions of scripture.

The preceding observation notwithstanding, this treatise also proposed that it is at the conceptual and linguistic levels that the connection becomes clearer between the Song of Moses and Paul’s speech to the Athenians. Specifically, as stated in section 3, Paul connected the theological perspective of the Song of Moses with his message to the Athenians. In order to make this relationship explicit, section 3.1 engaged in an analysis of the Song of Moses. Then, section 3.2 examined Paul’s speech to the Athenians. Part of the latter process included making use of the information in section 3.1 to call attention to the unmistakable conceptual and linguistic parallels between the Song of Moses and Paul’s oration.

For instance, one explicit linguistic parallel would be Deuteronomy 32:17, ‘gods they had not known’, and Acts 17:23, ‘to an unknown god’. Somewhat less overt correspondences include the following:

1. Deuteronomy 32:8, ‘gave the nations their inheritance’ and ‘set the boundaries of the peoples’; along with Acts 17:25, ‘gives everyone life and breath and all things’; and verse 26, ‘determined … the boundaries of their habitation’.
2. Deuteronomy 32:5, ‘his children’; and verse 6, ‘is he not your Father, who created you, who made and established you?’; along with Acts 17:29, ‘being then the offspring of God’ and ‘we should not regard the divine nature to be similar to gold or silver or stone, a figure sculpted by human skill and imagination’.

3. Deuteronomy 32:35, ‘for the day of their calamity is near’; along with Acts 17:31, ‘because he has established a day in which he intends to judge the world in righteousness’.

In addition to the above-mentioned literary and linguistic parallels, there are abundant conceptual correspondences between the Song of Moses and Paul’s speech to the Athenians. This is made explicit in the detailed and lengthy discussion appearing in section 3.2. In summary, an objective examination of the biblical data indicates that in Paul’s address to the Athenian sophists, the doctrinal perspective found in the Song of Moses dominated the apostle’s gospel message. Beyond that, the numerous cross-references appearing in section 3.2 to other Old Testament passages indicate that Paul’s address reflected the theological worldview of the Tanakh. One reasonable implication of the preceding assessment is that the apostle did not weaken his declaration of the good news to oblige the tendencies of his listeners. Rather, Paul examined the most exemplary archetypes of secular philosophical thought in his day, compared their dogmas to the truths of scripture, and declared how God’s Word is infinitely superior.

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