

22.12

Titus 1:12—Paul Quotes a Pagan

In the letter to Titus, Paul says, “It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said, ‘Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.’ That testimony is true” (Titus 1:12–13). No text containing these words has survived from antiquity, but Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and other authorities attributed the line to Epimenides, a seventh- or sixth-century-BCE philosopher-poet.

In the early twentieth century, a ninth-century Syriac commentary on the book of Acts was discovered that contained a full quote from the text of Epimenides, which apparently was available to the author of that work at that time. The context seems to be an error (or “lie”) on the part of Cretans who, by building a tomb for Zeus, failed to recognize that the god was immortal

They fashioned a tomb for you, holy and high one,
Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies.
But you are not dead: you live and abide forever,
For in you we live and move and have our being.

Of special note is the fact that this one stanza of ancient poetry is quoted twice in the New Testament! Paul is presented as citing the second line in Titus 1:12, and in Acts 17:28 he is presented as citing the concluding line in a completely different context: “[God] is not far from each one of us. For ‘in him we live and move and have our

being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’” (Acts 17:27–28).

In this passage, Paul further introduces an additional quotation from pagan poetry: the line “we too are his offspring.” He indicates that this line is something that more one Greek poet has said, and we do possess two texts that contain similar lines:

All the streets and all the market places
of humanity are full of Zeus.
Also full of him are the sea and the harbors,
and everywhere we all have need of Zeus.
For we are also his offspring.

—Aratus of Soli in Cilicia, *Phaenomena* 2–5¹

The beginning of the world was from you,
and with law you rule over all things.
To you all flesh may speak,
for we are your offspring.
Therefore I will lift a hymn to you
and will sing of your power.

—Cleanthes, *Fragment* 537, “Hymn to Zeus”²

Both Aratus and Cleanthes were Stoic philosophers (fourth to third centuries BCE).

1. Quoted in Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey to the New Testament*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 362.

2. Quoted in Gundry, *Survey to the New Testament*, 362.