

# Philodemus On Piety

Post by “Don” of December 19, 2020 at 11:31 PM

I'm going to return to columns 26-36 that discuss the Epicureans participation in the rites and festivals of ancient Greece. However, columns 36 to 59 talk about the benefits and harms from gods. This topic also appears in the Letter to Menoikeus 124 where the hoi polloi think of the gods bestowing benefits on those they like and harms on those the gods dislike. I originally thought this was an empty opinion; however, it seems, from this section of On Piety, that Epicurus and the kathegemones (“those who led the way,” i.e., the leaders of the school, e.g., Polyaeus, Hermarchus and Metrodorus) also held a version of this view. Note, too, that anywhere there is a reference to Book #, that's a reference to Epicurus's magnum opus On Nature.

Obbink's notes on Column 36, lines 1023-42 (excerpt):

*Here the kathegemones are said to have held a doctrine whereby there are produced benefits and harms for good and bad persons respectively [το περαινεσθαι ωφελιας εκ θεων τοις αγαθοις και βλαβας τοις κακοις]. Philodemus paraphrases, saying that for wise and just men (i.e., οι αγαθοι) there is a completion or production (by humans in general) of benefits and harms (from the gods) which are no less or even greater than those harms and benefits which people in general usually assume. The present passage thus adds another dimension to that expressed in Ad. Menoec. 124. For in addition to assuming the account there of why people in general think and talk as though the gods were a source of great harms and benefits (and, in a sense, are right about this), the present passage purports to give a rationale whereby the Epicurean sage will do so as well.*

So, to retrace our steps, here are excerpts from lines columns 36 and 37 from the scroll itself:

*And for the production of benefits from the gods for good people and harms for bad people they [Epicurus and the kathegemones] allow. And for the wise and just it must be conceived that benefits and harms which are no feebler [or 'more deficient' or 'weaker'] or even greater [i.e., no weaker {harms} or even greater {benefits}] than people in general suppose [literally 'attribute' or 'attach' to the gods] are made complete [i.e., 'are accomplished' 'are fulfilled'], not out of weakness or because we have need of anything from God, even in return for his benefit [or 'of his benefit here'], and these things they [i.e., the kathegemones] say most piously. And in On Gods what kind of source of retribution and preservation for humans through the deity must be accepted he [Epicurus] outlines in some detail. And in book 13 [of On Nature] he speaks concerning the affinity or alienation which God has for some people. And in book 35, in addition to clarifying somewhat this benefit, he says that even on account of thinking [5-7 words missing...]. And in his book On Destiny there is an exposition concerning the assistance [to humans] provided by them [i.e., the gods]. And in his letters to important individuals he is*

seen to pronounce consistently on this point;...

The topic continues into column 38:

*...similarly in Book 6 concerning adjudication [6-8 words missing] and that [he says] those who are oath-keeping [ενορκους] and just are moved by the most virtuous influences [literally 'vibrations' 'repercussions'] both from their own selves and from those [i.e., the gods]. And similiarly in book 8; and [Epicurus and the kathegemones] define the notion of benefit in the same way as Polyaeus in the first book of his Against Aristotle's On Philosophy declared his opinion that divine nature is the cause for us of these goods; and similarly Hermarchus that ...*

Now, this goes on like this for awhile, but in column 42 we find out that some theologians and philosophers perpetuated and preserved tales and poems of vengeful, wrathful gods to keep people in general in line:

*And preparing an immense deception against the rest, they subsequently rush into terrible, hidden injustices, since they no longer feared anyone believed to be all-knowing. Therefore it was safer to keep silent. Consequently that was what those of the theologians and philosophers who were just did. For the truth did not escape them, but, since they observed that evil deeds were held in check by the tales because foreboding hung over the more foolish of mankind, in order that we might not render life as a whole a beastly form of existence, and since otherwise the hostility ...[column missing...]*

Now, later columns (44, 45 from my previous posts on 46 and 47) talks about the need to preserve the gods' blessedness and incorruptibility as being truly pious.

Col. 48 talks about why these views are held:

*"it is necessary to declare to them simply and in a fairly direct manner that every person must observe the laws and the customs as long as they (i.e., the laws and the customs) do not command any element of impiety. For the deity, I think, ought to have been deemed surpassing in all things, that is to say, the deity that is evident and honoured in ritual observance (or 'in intelligent contemplation'), as Epicurus proclaims."*

Keywords here are "ritual observance/intelligent contemplation" translating εν τη θεωρια This ambiguous meaning goes back to my new translation of the characteristics of the Epicurean sage, namely this section <https://sites.google.com/view/epicurean...n-contemplation> Some translations of that section of Diogenes Laertius say the sage will enjoy the spectacles more than others. I feel justified in my translation since Obbink here seems to be dealing with the same ambiguous dilemma of the word θεωρια.

Column 49 gets at why some people said Epicurus wasn't brought up on charges of impiety like Socrates was:

*They [opponents of Epicureans] also claim that Epicurus escaped from the Athenian masses not because [2-4 words missing] he held less impious views, but because his philosophy had*

*escaped the notice of many people.*

Just slander? Or a manifestation of the *lathe biosas*?

Column 51 comes back to Epicurus's practice:

*And with regard to festivals and sacrifices and all such things generally, it must be entirely acknowledged that he acted in accordance with what he believed and taught and that he faithfully employed oaths and tokens of good faith, and he kept them; and the demonstrations about his life which are in Zeno [one of Philodemus's teachers] make clear to people this most important testament among his agreements [i.e., Epicurus's will]. So far in fact was he from being harmful to anyone of mankind that not only did he honour his parents as much as the gods, nor was he fondly disposed only towards his brothers, ... [missing pieces up to column 53]*  
...

Column 53 talks about how Epicurus was kind to everyone, didn't bring any lawsuits, and did not become the butt of writers of comedy! He lived "without falling prey to the virtue-hating and all-harassing mouth of comedy." "Virtue-hating and all-harassing mouth of comedy" translates the Greek το μισοχρηστον στομα και παντα σινομενον επεσε της κωμωδιας (misokhreston stoma kai panta sinomenon epese tes komodias). I must admit that's a pretty good epithet to throw at someone! The Greek misokhreston literally means "hating-the-better-sort".

53 continues in column 54:

*And he did not even utter a word against the sophisticated orators who made mention of him; so great was the strength of the effective precaution against all things that could possibly annoy anyone in deed or word, or even give the impression of intending to inflict harm. For what some have ventured to say, namely that he went unknown to people, shows first of all that neither he nor his followers were harmfully disposed towards their fellow citizens; and then that no bitter slander or lawsuit on account of a major doctrine ...*

I should point out that "he went unknown to people" does NOT use any form of *lathe biosas* in the original Greek text but rather [εγ]ινωσκε[τ]ο. The idea here appears to be to assert how much more Epicurus was an upstanding pious citizen who didn't bother anyone unlike philosophers like Socrates who got himself charged, tried, and killed. Column 56 even says that Epicurus was "conducting himself so many years in a manner not inactive towards the city [i.e., playing his full part in public life]." Cassius may find that last line interesting in light of the popular apolitical "hiding in a cave" descriptions of Epicurus.