

"You will not taste death: Jesus and Epicureanism" (Gospel of Thomas Thread)

Post by "Eikadistes" of February 1, 2022 at 11:37 AM

I read most of the book and definitely have some observations.

He proposes that Epicurean philosophy not only influenced the development of early Christianity, but may even be a primary influence on the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*. His thesis relies on several assumptions that I think are difficult to prove, that the *Gospel of Thomas* is an authentic representation of early Christianity, that the life of the Jesus of the Gospels can be adequately reconstructed, and that the Jesus of the Gospels was an Epicurean wise man.

He heavily relies on personal speculation to further his propositions.

Chronologically, the *Gospel of Thomas* was written sometime after *Mark*, *Matthew*, *Luke*, and the hypothesized "Q" Gospel from which *Matthew* and *Luke* both drew. Most scholars date *Thomas* closer to *John* (if not explicitly after it), sometime at the beginning of the 2nd-century along with other, apocryphal writings of Gnostics. Given this chronology, the Gnostic tone, and the later rejection of this gospel of Biblical canon, it seems unlikely that the *Gospel of Thomas* is a useful historical text from which to reconstruct a sketch of the allegedly historical figure called Jesus.

Hannah spends a significant chapter exploring "the paranormal" and speculates that Jesus may have been connected to ancient paranormal activity. He catalogues various accounts of "inexplicable" phenomena reported throughout the modern era to help substantiate his claim and further speculates that the "miracles" of Jesus were actual instances of extraordinary phenomena controlled by a wise man connected with "the paranormal". This chapter is a good example of Hannah's general approach, *hand-picked evidence, a lack of peer review, and personal speculations*.

The rest of the book is a commentary on each Jesus Saying in *The Gospel of Thomas*. The connections drawn between most of the sayings and Epicurean philosophy are tenuous (much like our recent discussions about Buddhism). While Hannah does find several interesting connections, the lack of an ability to definitively demonstrate *Thomas* as an Epicurean document, and Jesus as an Epicurean philosopher neutralizes the speculation.

I think De Witt makes the best argument for a connection between Epicurean philosophy and Christianity based on the historical tensions documented in the Pauline *Epistles* and Paul's appropriation of Epicurean vocabulary and techniques to evangelize a non-Christian, Greek audience. Beyond Paul, I don't think we'll find any Epicurean connections with the character of Jesus from the Gospels. There are obvious connections with Philo's Neo-Platonic Judaism, with

the eschatological John the Baptist and the community of the Essenes, with the anti-imperialism of the Zealots, and, most of all given the likely historical context, as one (of many) 1st-century Jewish Messiah-claimants.

Personally, I believe that any investigation of "the historical figure of Jesus" needs to begin with an honest attempt to authenticate his historicity as a verifiable individual, and not just the amalgamation of similar stories of Jewish guys named "Josh" who claimed to be the Messiah and were executed by the Roman empire. Besides several very brief anecdotes from Flavius Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny, we lack the evidence to authenticate his identity. It seems odd to me that someone writing from an Epicurean perspective would jump straight to the claim that "Not only **did** Jesus exist ... but also he harnessed psychic energy to heal people with Epicurean magic."

I think Hannah set out to try to prove a highly imaginative fiction. He paints a colorful picture that would be the perfect topic for late night on the History Channel, but not something constructive to our study as Epicureans.