

Episode One Hundred Thirty-Five - The Letter to Menoecus 02 - On The Nature of the Gods

Post by "Cassius" of August 14, 2022 at 8:58 AM

We need to include as background material both the "Riddle" and also the sections from [Diogenes of Oinoanda](#). I will paste them here as I find them:

Fr. 19

[Let us then contradict Homer, who] talks [all sorts of nonsense] about them, [representing them sometimes as adulterers, sometimes as] lame, [sometimes as thievish, or even as being struck by mortals with a spear,] as well as inducing the craftsmen to produce inappropriate portrayals. Some statues of gods shoot arrows and are produced holding] a bow, [represented] like Heracles in Homer; others are attended by a body-guard of wild beasts; others are angry with the prosperous, like Nemesis according to popular opinion; whereas we ought to make statues of the gods genial and smiling, so that we may smile back at them rather than be afraid of them.

Well, then, you people, let us reverence the gods [rightly] both at festivals and on [unhallowed occasions, both] publicly [and privately], and let us observe the customs [of our fathers in relation to them and let not the imperishable beings be falsely accused at all] by us [in our vain fear that they are responsible for all misfortunes], bringing [sufferings to us] and [contriving burdensome obligations] for themselves. [And let us also call upon] them [by name] ...

Fr. 20

[So it is obvious that wrong-doers, given that they do not fear the penalties imposed by the laws, are not] afraid of [the gods.] This [has to be] conceded. For if they were [afraid, they] would not [do wrong]. As for [all] the others, [it is my opinion] that the [wise] are not [(reasoning indicates) righteous] on account of the gods, but on account of [thinking] correctly and the [opinions] they hold [regarding] certain things [and especially] pains and death (for indeed invariably and without exception human beings do wrong either on account of fear or on account of pleasures), and that ordinary people on the other hand are righteous, in so far as they are righteous, on account of the laws and the penalties, imposed by the laws, hanging over them. But even if some of their number are conscientious on account of the laws, they are few: only just two or three individuals are to be found among great segments of multitudes, and not even these are steadfast in acting righteously; for they are not soundly persuaded about providence. A clear indication of the complete inability of the gods to prevent wrong-doings is provided by the nations of the Jews and Egyptians, who, as well as being the most superstitious

of all peoples, are the vilest of all peoples.

On account of what kind of gods, then, will human beings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones or on account of Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades. We are left with this conclusion; otherwise, why should not those who disregard the laws scorn fables much more?

So, with regard to righteousness, neither does our doctrine do harm [not does] the opposite [doctrine help], while, with regard to the other condition, the opposite doctrine not only does not help, but on the contrary also does harm, whereas our doctrine not only does not harm, but also helps. For the one removes disturbances, while the other adds them, as has already been made clear to you before.

That not only [is our doctrine] helpful, [but also the opposite doctrine harmful, is clearly shown by] the [Stoics as they go astray. For they say in opposition to us] that the god both is maker of [the] world and takes providential care of it, providing for all things, including human beings. Well, in the first place, we come to this question: was it, may I ask, for his own sake that the god created the world [or for the sake of human beings? For it is obvious that it was from a wish to benefit either himself or human beings that he embarked on this] undertaking. For how could it have been otherwise, if nothing is produced without a cause and these things are produced by a god? Let us then examine this view and what Stoics mean. It was, they say, from a wish to have a city and fellow-citizens, just as if [he were an exile from a city, that] the god [created the world and human beings. However, this supposition, a concoction of empty talking, is] self-evidently a fable, composed to gain the attention of an audience, not a natural philosopher's argument searching for the truth and inferring from probabilities things not palpable to sense. Yet even if, in the belief that he was doing some good [to himself, the god] really [made the world and human beings],

For god [is, I say], a living being, indestructible [and] blessed from [age to] age, having complete [self-sufficiency]. Moreover, what [god, if] he had existed for infinite [time] and enjoyed tranquillity [for thousands of years, would have got] this idea that he needed a city and fellow-citizens? Add to this absurdity that he, being a god, should seek to have beings as fellow-citizens.

And there is this further point too: if he had created the world as a habitation and city for himself, I seek to know where he was living before the world was created; I do not find an answer, at any rate not one consistent with the doctrine of these people when they declare that this world is unique. So for that infinite time, apparently, the god of these people was cityless and homeless and, like an unfortunate man — I do not say «god» —, having neither city nor fellow-citizens, he was destitute and roaming about at random. If therefore the divine nature shall be deemed to have created things for its own sake, all this is absurd; and if for the sake of men, there are yet other more absurd consequences.

Let us divide the discussion into two —the world and men themselves. And first let us speak about the world.

[If indeed] all things are well arranged for men and nothing is antagonistic to them, our situation is like that of creatures made by a god. But let it be agreed first