

# Epicureans and the Areopagus Speech: Stereotypes and Theodicy

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2023 at 11:05 AM

Great find. Lots of good stuff there, including info about the parallel between Epicurean and Sadducee views, with this writer extending the Epicurean parallel to Cain in Cain vs Abel:

Quote

**Just as Josephus described Sadducees and Pharisees in terms of their opposing points of view on theodicy, so we find Cain and Abel distinguished point-for-point on the same topic.**

Some scholars have attempted to identify Cain and Abel with various historical groups. Sheldon Isenberg, for example, argued that the midrash on Gen 4:8 represents a Sadducee-Pharisee controversy.<sup>(45)</sup> He based his argument on the stereotype which we have already noted that Sadducees deny the resurrection. Henry Fischel, however, argued that the midrash is Epicurean, citing in support numerous passages from the Rabbis which parallel in form and content the anti-theodicy sayings attributed to Epicureans.<sup>(46)</sup>

Although the question of provenance, whether Sadducean or Epicurean, may be impossible to solve, that should not deter us from noting the persistence and pervasiveness of the topos either against or for theodicy. It matters little whether Epicureans = Sadducees = Cain or Stoics = Pharisees = Abel, for the issue is that God was perceived in terms of a stereotype, the topos about theodicy. We have ample evidence that on the topic of theodicy, there were stereotypical responses and that certain well known parties in the Hellenistic and Jewish worlds were readily perceived in terms of their stand on theodicy. Stereotypes, then, describe both doctrine discussed and those who discussed it.

I. Summary and Conclusion

In regard to the hypotheses stated earlier in this study, we may now conclude:

1. Among the many theological elements in the Areopagus Speech, the chief issues which Luke highlights are providence and theodicy.

2. Luke presents characters and issues in contrasting pairs and by parallel examples. The Epicureans and Stoics of Acts 17 are balanced by the Sadducees and Pharisees of Acts 23.

3. Like other ancient writers, Luke portrays groups and parties in terms of stereotypes.

4. Luke knows of and presents a stereotypical description of theodicy, a topos on it (Acts 17; 23; 24).

5. Luke is not ignorant of the stereotypical perception of Epicureans and Stoics,<sup>(47)</sup> and has told the story in Acts 17:16-34 in such a way that these two parties react in contrasting fashion to Paul, both at the beginning of the speech and at its end. The stereotypical perception of Epicureans and Stoics is based on contrasting assessments of theodicy.

From this analysis, we conclude that Luke has cast the characters and the issues in such a way as to argue that Christian theology belongs to the common, acceptable doctrine of God held by good and reasonable people, whether Hellenistic Stoics or Jewish Pharisees. In regard to Paul's speech in Acts 17, we noticed that belief in providence and theodicy, while congenial to the Stoics, is not exclusive to them, but is a common, orthodox doctrine. Paul's speech in Acts 24, moreover, argues that his Christian belief in God is also vintage Jewish theology, although the Sadducees, guardians of Israel's shrine, would not agree. At least Luke makes this claim to orthodoxy through Paul.

Luke, then, presents certain aspects of Christian thought, i.e. theodicy, in terms acceptable to Greek and Jew alike; he would argue that this doctrine is orthodox, common and traditional. And so, the charge in Acts 17:6 that Paul and the Christians "turn the world upside down" must be false, for their doctrine is quite in conformity with what all intelligent, good people think.<sup>(48)</sup> In fact, to be mocked by the Epicureans and then to be dismissed by the Sadducees plays into this strategy. If mockery and dismissal come from groups which can be shown to be wrong, that in itself is further confirmation of the correctness of what they mock and dismiss. Comparably, to find common ground and perhaps endorsement from groups generally considered the guardians of the basic tradition (Stoics, Pharisees) can only shed that approbation to the new group of Christians as well. At least they are not mavericks.

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