

# Discussion-Starters With Non-Epicureans: Biblical References to Epicurus / Epicurean Philosophy

Post by "Cassius" of February 29, 2020 at 7:37 AM

In a recent exchange about the use of the word "hedonism" (I was advocating against it on the grounds that it does not adequately represent Epicurus, is too loaded with negative connotations, and shouldn't be substituted for an accurate translation) I was reminded that one of my main goals is reaching out to non-Epicureans of the normal ordinary people variety. Of course the point comes to mind because a normal ordinary person would not use the term "hedonism" in everyday conversation anyway - it is largely today a term of art used by professional philosophers to keep Epicurus and others in a convenient box off to the side of mainstream philosophy.

So I was reminded of the question, "What words and topics that are of some interest to "ordinary" people are there for building connections in their minds with Epicurean philosophy - and one of the most obvious is to point out to them that Epicurus and Epicurean philosophy are referenced in several places in the Bible.

I think it's probably a good idea to list these for ready reference, because most of them do not identify Epicurus by name, and yet are clearly pointed in his direction. The best source for help in compiling such a list is [Norman DeWitt's "St Paul and Epicurus" available free here](#).

I see that he online version does not contain the table of "Verses Newly Explained or Translated" at the end of the book, so here is a copy of that (click to enlarge):

The image shows two pages from a book. The left page is titled "Verses Newly Explained or Translated" and contains a table with columns for "VERSE", "EXPLANATION", and "REFERENCE". The right page is titled "Verses Newly Explained and Paraphrased" and contains a similar table with columns for "VERSE", "EXPLANATION", and "REFERENCE". Both tables list various biblical verses and their corresponding explanations or references to Epicurean philosophy.

I will assemble a list of direct cites in the outline below. I won't have time to collect all of them at first, so if you see that I miss any please comment below. This first list is a selection from Norman DeWitt's references that seem to be the most plainly relevant.

1. [Acts 17:18](#) Then certain philosophers of the **Epicureans**, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.
2. [Galatians 4:3](#) Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under **the elements of the world:** [4](#)But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, [5](#)To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. [6](#)And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. [7](#)Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. [8](#)Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. [9](#)But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to **the weak and beggarly elements**, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? [10](#)Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. [11](#)I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.
3. [Ephesians 2:2](#) [2](#) Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the **prince of the power of the air**, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:...
4. [Philippians 3:18-19](#) [18](#)(For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* the enemies of the cross of Christ: [19](#)Whose **end is destruction**, whose **God is their belly**, and *whose glory is* in their shame, who mind earthly things.)
5. [Colossians 2:8](#) Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after **the rudiments of the world**, and not after Christ.
6. [1 Thessalonians 5:3](#) For when they shall say, **Peace and safety**; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.
7. [2 Peter 3:4](#) Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, [4](#)And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, **all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.**

We also need to address the "Old Testament." This section needs even more work to rearrange than the first section:

1. The book of Ecclesiastes
  1. [Ecclesiastes 9:10](#) [10](#)Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do *it* with thy might; for *there is* no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

Also:

1. [Epicurus in the Mishnah: From Epicurus.net](#): In the Talmudic *Mishnah*, one of the authoritative documents of Rabbinical Judaism, there is a remarkable statement in the tractate Sanhedrin that defines the Jewish religion in relation to Epicureanism: **"All Israel**

**has a share in the world to come, as Isaiah said: And all of your people who are righteous will merit eternity and inherit the land. And these are the people who do not merit the world to come: The ones who say that there is no resurrection of the dead, and those who deny the Torah is from the heavens, and Epicureans ('Apikorsim')."**

2. [Antiochus IV Epiphanes, also from Epicurus.net](#): The origins of this anti-Epicurean element of Jewish thought can be traced to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., when the Seleucid monarch **Antiochus IV Epiphanes** embarked on a military campaign against Egypt in an attempt to conquer his Ptolemaic rival. Judea had the misfortune to be located between the Seleucid heartland of Syria and Ptolemaic Egypt, and the Judeans were divided into pro-Seleucid and pro-Ptolemaic factions. At this time, the hereditary Zadokite priesthood had been deeply influenced by Greek culture, adopting doctrines that tended to discount the conservative oral tradition and deny some of the more superstitious beliefs then current, notably the belief in bodily resurrection. At the time of Antiochus's campaign, the Zadokite high priest was a pro-Ptolemaic partisan. Antiochus, anxious to secure Judea in connection with his Egyptian expedition and to create a more culturally-unified empire, had the Zadokite high priest removed and founded a Greek-style Gymnasium in Jerusalem. Antiochus was sympathetic to Epicureanism (albeit not acting in accord with Epicurus's injunctions to avoid politics), so his attempt at a forced hellenization of Judea was closely linked to Epicureanism in the minds of the Judean patriots. Another factor was that Epicureans were prominent in the hellenized cities of Galilee, creating a rivalry between Epicureanism and the traditional religion among the northern Judeans. Antiochus's provocations brought about a strong nationalistic reaction, which exploded into violence when a rumor of Antiochus's death reached Judea. While the rumor was false, nonetheless the Hasmonean leader **Judas Maccabeus** was ultimately successful in his revolt against the Seleucids. After the Hasmoneans consolidated their power, a rather delicate situation developed with respect to the priesthood. The hereditary successors to the priesthood had had their legitimacy fatally undermined by their hellenizing tendencies and their close association with the foreign Ptolemaic monarchy. The party of the "separatists" (the Pharisees), prevented the Zadokite legitimists (the Sadducees) from reassuming control of the temple in Jerusalem, while some of the Sadducees set up a rival temple in the Egyptian city of Leontopolis.

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## **Post by "Don" of February 29, 2020 at 3:08 PM**

This is a great list! It has been some time since I've had access to DeWitt, so this is a nice refresher. I don't know why, but it's a little thrill to know that the actual word "Epicurean" appears in the Bible.

Being me, I had to take one of these and trace backwards to see if the original Greek words were the same in the Bible and in Epicurus. I chose Galatians 4:3 to check out for curiosity's sake. The key phrase is **τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου** (ta stoikheia tou kosmou (< "cosmos")) "the basic principles of the world". My question was: Does Epicurus refer to **τὰ στοιχεῖα** in his extant works? The answer: Yes!

In the Letter to Menoikos we find:

Do and practice, then, the things I have always recommended to you, holding them to be the **stairway to a beautiful life**.

This is where translations can trip you up! The phrase translated as "**stairway** to a beautiful life" is **στοιχεῖα** τοῦ καλῶς ζῆν which I personally would render something more like "the elements of living beautifully and nobly."

We also find the elements in the Letter to Pythocles which one translation gives as:

"**the ultimate elements of things** are indivisible" ἢ ὅτι ἄτομα <τὰ> **στοιχεῖα**

While I realize **στοιχεῖα** is a fine word that doesn't always have Epicurean implications, it's still interesting to see it used in such disparate texts.

Curiosity assuaged... for now. 😊

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### Post by "Cassius" of February 29, 2020 at 3:14 PM

Interesting and thanks again! I think Dewitt may tend to strain a little to find analogies in St Paul and Epicurus but I have found no reasons to doubt his dexterity with classical languages (which appears to have been his professional specialty) but it is good to see that at least some of what he says seems consistent with your observations.

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### Post by "Elli" of March 3, 2020 at 9:43 AM

[Don](#) I totally agree with you. Moreover, the methodology of the Canon is also called as "**στοιχειωτικόν**" [pron. stoichiotikon] which means **elementary**.

"Καλούσι δ' αυτό (το Κανονικό) περί κριτηρίου και αρχής, και στοιχειωτικόν" (DL Book 10, Epicurus 30)

And that means : They call it (the Canon) on criterion and principle, and elementary.

And continues... for **Dialectics they (epicureans) wholly reject** as **superfluous**. For they say that the **correspondence of words with things** is **sufficient** for the natural philosophers.

Arundel MS 531 2nd half of the 15th century, Diogenes Laertius, Vitae philosophorum (TLG 0004.001). A few marginal annotations, partly Latin.

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καὶ ἐπιτολῆσ· καὶ τὸ πρὸς τὸ τέλος· ἡ ὁμοίωσις μὲν τοῦ  
τὸ κανονικὸν ὁμοῦ τῶ φησὶ κῶσιν τῶ πρῶν· καὶ λῶσι  
δὲ αὐτὸ πρὸς κριτηρίου καὶ ἀρχῆσ'· καὶ τοιχογραφίη·  
τὸ δὲ φησὶ πρὸς γενέσεσ καὶ φθοράσ καὶ πρὸς φύσεσ·  
τὸ δὲ ἡθικόν, πρὸς ἀρετῶν καὶ φθαρτῶν· ὅτι  
βίον καὶ ζῶσ'· τὴν διαλεκτικὴν ὡσ' παρέλκουσ  
ἀποδοκιμάζουσιν· ἀρκῆν γὰρ τοῖσ φησὶ κῶσιν,  
καὶ τῶ τῶν πραγμάτων φησὶ τῶ· ἐν τοῖσ τῶσ'

1η πρὸς Διαλεκτικῆς

Post by "Don" of March 3, 2020 at 10:14 AM

Thank you. And that image is a thrill!! I was not aware it was online. I immediately went to the British Library site to view the whole digitized manuscript! I even [added the website as an External Link to Diogenes' Wikipedia article](#). Ευχαριστώ!!

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**Post by “Elli” of March 3, 2020 at 1:32 PM**

Παρακαλώ, και είναι ευχαρίστησή μου !! (i.e. you're welcome, and it's my pleasure) [Don](#) 😊