

From Epicurus.net

Post by “Matt” of January 14, 2019 at 11:37 AM

A selection from Epicurus.net, clearly written from a sympathetic Epicurean perspective. Though the author highlights many interesting points, they bizarrely take the Christ in India/Kashmir hypothesis and the Christ Myth hypothesis as possibly genuine. That should give some pause and caution since both theories are considered rather fringe from a completely objective, non-religious, academic perspective. But regardless of that peculiarity, the author does highlight some of the main opponents of Epicureanism. It’s a good jumping off point to find the actual texts.

Epicureanism and the Early Christians

As indicated in the discussion of Judea above, Christians originated as one of the Nazarene cults. Unfortunately, the various historical accounts of Jesus are highly unreliable and mutually contradictory, and many of the stories associated with him may be an amalgamation of folktales about several different Nazarene leaders and wholly fictional accounts (based on widespread myths in circulation at the time) written many decades after the alleged events described. As best as can be determined, Jesus appears to have been a renegade Mandaean who claimed to be a descendant of the royal house of David, the anointed (“messiah” or “christos”) king of Jewish prophecy who would conquer the world. There are also strong indications that Jesus also claimed to be an incarnation of a “wisdom of life” that the Mandaeans equate with god.

Jesus's political pretensions were cut short at a crucial stage in his career when he entered Jerusalem in preparation for a coup against the Herodians, only to be betrayed by one of his own followers. Jesus was arrested and crucified, but to the dismay of the Roman/Herodian authorities, Jesus survived the crucifixion (possibly with the connivance of the commander of the Roman troops handling the crucifixion, who later became a Christian bishop in Cappodocia),

and after his resuscitation was seen leaving the tomb-chamber assisted by two other Nazarenes. As the startling news of Jesus's resuscitation spread, his brother **James** announced that Jesus had been miraculously resurrected and that he had been personally deputized by Jesus to lead the Nazarenes as their "bishop of bishops" until Jesus's return (which was supposed to take place within a single generation of his original ministry). James's claim to leadership was accepted by most of the recent Nazarene converts, as he was the heir apparent to Jesus and thus next in line to be King of the Judeans. There is some evidence that Jesus meanwhile fled to Syria and then eastwards out of the Roman Empire, where he continued his teaching and faith-healing for many decades in Iran and Kashmir. A possible tomb of Jesus is located in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir.

While James's sect in Jerusalem was largely destroyed by his execution and the flight of his followers from Judea prior to the Roman sacking of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., as well as the systematic campaign carried on by the Romans to kill the families of all messianic claimants, a missionary to non-Judeans by the name of **Saul of Tarsus** (also known by his latinized name **Paul**) transmitted a less militant form of Christianity to various cities in Turkey, Greece, and Italy. Rather than stressing Jesus's messianic role as a Judean world conqueror, Saul claimed that Jesus was not just a mere mortal from the house of David, but one of the immortals who shortly after his resurrection had ascended into heaven. Saul portrayed Jesus as a miracle-working demi-god, the son of the traditional Judean deity, who had come for the salvation of all mankind and not just Judeans. With this dejudaizing process initiated by Saul, Christianity could be made acceptable to non-Judeans, who otherwise would have had no reason to feel any loyalty towards a Jewish messiah.

In the course of his attempts to win converts Saul soon came into collision with the Epicurean communities that existed throughout the Greek-speaking world. Chapter 17 of the *Acts of the Apostles* records Saul's sermon to the Athenians, including Epicureans and Stoics, gathered at the Areopagus in Athens. When Saul gets ready to speak, the Epicureans present ask "What will this seed-pecker say?". The Epicurean response to Saul's discourse was not recorded, but even the author of *Acts* admits that Saul was not too successful in winning converts on that occasion.

A more significant aspect of Saul's evangelism was the extent to which he adopted certain peculiarities of Epicurean terminology and phraseology, and certain Epicurean social customs; and the extent to which he focused much of his rhetoric on gainsaying Epicurean denials of divine providence, resurrection, and an after-life. His letters to the Thessalonians and Corinthians in particular show this tendency. These letters offer strong indirect evidence that Epicureans were the principal ideological opponents that Saul had to contend with in Greece. Also very telling was his indirect references to Antiochus Epiphanes as the anti-Christ, making the same kind of anti-Seleucid/anti-Epicurean allusions that were illustrated above in connection with the Talmud.

After Saul, the fledgling Christian church faced persecution at the hands of the Romans, and was largely confined to winning converts from the uneducated segments of the population. The characteristic early Christian attitude towards Greek philosophers was summed up by the

teaching that the wisdom of the world was foolishness, squarely placing Christian faith in fierce opposition to human rationality and the human desires embraced by Epicureanism.

Epicureanism and the Christian Apologists

By the mid-2nd century A.D., the Christian movement had become secure enough so that it could aspire to win converts from more educated circles. Certain church leaders began to seriously engage themselves intellectually against Greek philosophy, often in the form of written apologies against “pagans” and rival Christians. These works routinely included attacks on Epicureanism, as shown by **Tatian's Address to the Greeks**, **Justin the Martyr's Hortatory Address to the Greeks** and **On the Resurrection**, and **Irenaeus of Lyon's Against the Heretics**.

Two significant anti-Epicurean themes emerged in these early apologies: first, Justin and Tatian mocked Greek philosophers as being hopelessly disputatious with one another, taking their disagreements as evidence that human intellect could not arrive at definite conclusions about reality (a somewhat ironic charge in view of the emerging factionalism of the Christians themselves). In the *Hortatory Address to the Greeks*, Justin writes:

Quote

“How then, you men of Greece, can it be safe for those who desire to be saved, to fancy that they can learn the true religion from these philosophers, who were neither able so to convince themselves as to prevent sectarian wrangling with one another, and not to appear definitely opposed to one another's opinions?”

The second theme was to attack the specifically Epicurean denial of divine providence and after-life and affirmation of pleasure as the supreme good and of materialistic atomism. While these earliest apologies often lumped Epicurus together with other philosophers, the succeeding decades saw a significant change. The next major Christian antagonist of Epicureanism was **Tertullian** (2nd to 3rd century A.D.). Unlike previous Christian apologists, Tertullian fully grasped the gross irrationality of his own anti-Epicurean arguments, and was all the more inflamed against it by the inclination of certain heretics to adopt Epicurean doctrines in arguing against bodily resurrection or against divine providence. Tertullian's rage against Epicureanism and other Greek philosophies and their influence on heretics is best illustrated in *The Prescription Against Heretics* where he says “These are the doctrines of men and of demons produced for itching ears of the spirit of this world's wisdom: this the Lord called ‘foolishness’ and ‘chose the foolish things of the world’ to confound even philosophy itself. For philosophy it is which is the material of the world's wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and the dispensation of God. Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy” and went on to mock the diversity of philosophical theories and thunder “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

His opposition to philosophy led to a profoundly irrationalist attitude, a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of the Christian opposition to worldly wisdom originally promoted by Saul. This irrationalism is blatantly evident in *On the Flesh of Christ*, where he proclaims that “The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed because men must needs be ashamed of it. And the Son

of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried, and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible.”